REMOVE AI TOOLS YOU DON'T NEED

Starting with Microsoft Copilot!
p60

MOST CONVINCING EMAIL SCAM EVER?

It's almost impossible to spot
p11

Computer active

ISSUE 710 | 21 MAY – 3 JUNE 2025

Learn something new in every issue

Give laptop snoopers the cold shoulder – p49

WINDOWS 11 HACKED!

Make it work EXACTLY how you want it to
p38

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☑ Phone ☑ Tablet ☑ Printer & more
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p74

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p62

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Distributed by Marketforce

Average sales, **Jan-Dec 2024 48,816** copies per issue.

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From the Editor

I'm sure some people use old hard drives as paperweights or doorstops, but it makes more sense to recycle or sell them. Before you do though you must wipe any personal data they contain. The same applies for most old tech you no longer need – phones, laptops, PCs, TVs and even printers.

Robert Irvine explains how to do all this in his comprehensive Cover Feature. He goes beyond mere factory resets to eliminate every last scrap of data. Sadly, this no longer involves using the superbly named 'Darik's Boot and Nuke' software, which hasn't been updated in years. Our recommended alternative, ShredOS, doesn't promise the same level of mass destruction, but it's just as effective.

Inspired by Robert's instructions, I wiped data from one TV, two routers, three phones and enough USB sticks to stretch four times around my office. I'll work through a mountain of SD cards next. Some I'll sell, others I'll give away. What will you do with yours? Please let me know.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

p11
p60
REMOVE AI TOOLS YOU DON'T NEED
Starting with Microsoft Copilot!
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Phone Tablet Printer & more p50
PLUS
SYNC YOUR CLIPBOARD ACROSS YOUR PCs p74
p74
RESCUE YOUR GOOGLE TIMELINE
Act fast – though you may be too late p62
p62

THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

£14.99
New, cheaper price of Norton 360 Deluxe (three years, two devices) – *p32*

One million
Number of phone calls made to spam-avoiding bank service 159 since 2021 – *p9*

163
New areas where copper lines are no longer being sold – *p7*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

Contents

21 May – 3 June 2025 • **Issue 710**

6 **News** Group apps by category in major Start menu update

10 **Question of the Fortnight** Will you be scammed by M&S and Co-op hackers?

11 **Protect Your Tech** Fake 'subpoena' emails from Gmail

12 **Letters** It's vital that Google is forced to sell Chrome

14 **Consumeractive** Should I contact retailer or manufacturer about Lenovo warranty?

16 **Grow Your Family Tree** Search Prisoner of War cards

18 **Best Free Software** UniGetUI 3.2

21 **Named & Shamed** Genius – AI Photo Editor's unintelligent AI tools

Reviews

22 **PCSpecialist Hydra R60S** Desktop PC makes perfect sense

23 **MSI Prestige 13 AI+ Evo A2VM** Featherweight laptop is light fantastic

24 **HP LaserJet Pro M209dw** Compact printer makes good impression

25 **Google Pixel 9a** Android phone makes all the right calls

26 **Obsbot Meet SE** Quality webcam has an eye for detail

28 **Sony WF-C710N** Classy earbuds keep the noise down

Ugreen Uno 65W charger Fast charger is simply electric

29 **OnePlus Watch 3** A smartwatch that'll run for days

30 **Buy It/Competition** Win a QDOS SnapStand Qi2 3-in-1 charger

PCSpecialist Hydra R60S

MSI Prestige 13 AI+ Evo A2VM

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Workshops & Tips

35 How to... Improve your photo editing using layers

38 Hack Windows so it works exactly as you want

40 Readers' Tips
Make PrtScn key open Snipping Tool

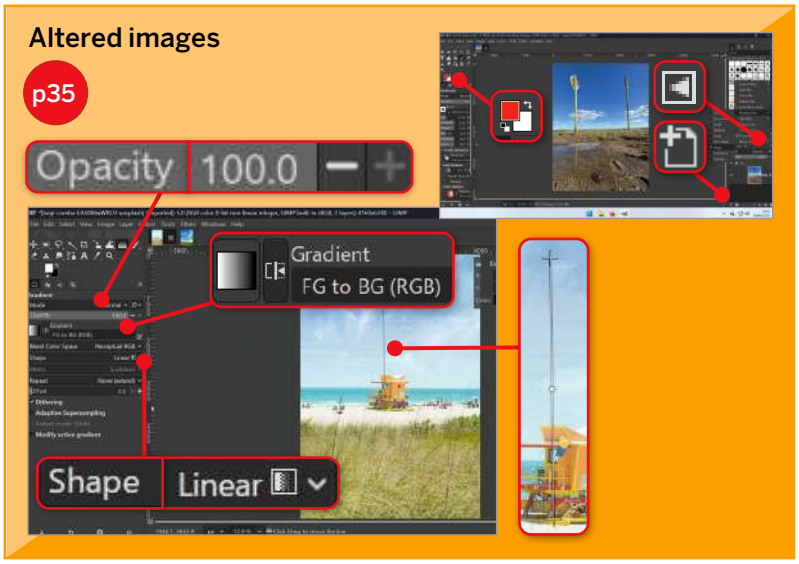
42 Browser Tips Access and tweak Edge settings more easily

44 Phone and Tablet Tips Open and annotate PDFs directly in Chrome

46 Make Windows Better
Sort files by type then size

47 Make Office Better
Check which bills are overdue

48 In the Club
Lock/unlock cells in spreadsheets



49 What's All the Fuss About?
Shoulder surfers

50 COVER FEATURE
Wipe your old devices
Remove personal data from unused PCs, phones, printers, TVs and more, so you can sell or recycle them risk-free

60 Remove AI tools you don't need
We explain how to hide or disable unwanted AI tools tech companies force upon you

62 Rescue your Google Timeline
Save your Timeline data in Maps before Google removes it for good

64 Problems Solved Can I keep SSID and password from my old router?

71 Reader Support Why don't your instructions block scam emails?

72 Jargon Buster

74 Easy When You Know How
Robert Irvine syncs his clipboard between PCs

Group apps by category in major Start menu update

You'll soon be able to group your Start menu apps into category folders, Microsoft has confirmed.

It's the most significant of several changes that will make it easier to control what the Windows 11 menu shows.

The new 'category' view is similar to the App Library on iPhones and iPads, which groups apps by function, such as Social, Entertainment and Travel.

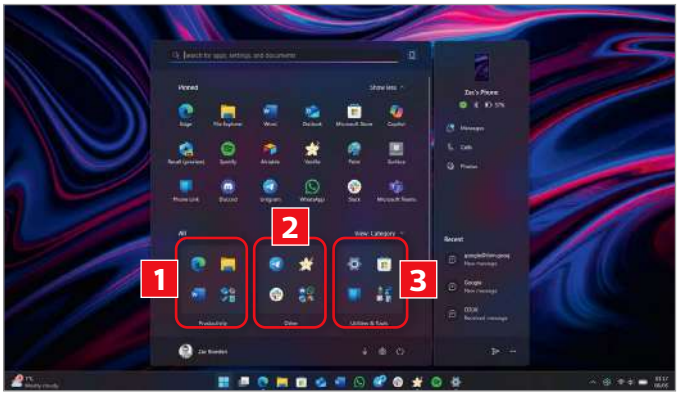
Microsoft says apps will be categorised automatically. In our screenshot (right) it has created groups for Productivity 1, Other 2 and 'Utilities & Tools' 3.

It's one of three layout options you'll see when you click 'All', which as part of the changes will move to the bottom of the main menu.

Another new option is a grid view that presents apps in three columns. These join the existing view that lists the apps alphabetically.

Other changes include showing all your pinned apps by default, and hiding Recommended apps, which are apps Microsoft thinks you might like, as well as tools you've used and files you've opened recently.

This means you'll now be able to make the Start menu show a complete page of pinned apps that appears above your apps list.



WHAT WE THINK

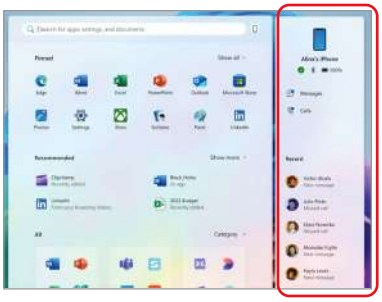
This could be the change that stops Windows 11 users yearning for Windows 10's Start menu. It still won't be perfect, but Microsoft has finally realised what we all knew years ago: users want complete control over what the Start menu shows (just like the taskbar and desktop). When it arrives on our PC the first thing we'll do is hide Recommended apps. We don't need Microsoft telling us which tools to use.

See recent calls and messages

Microsoft is also adding a 'phone companion' panel on the right of the Start menu that shows phones that you've synced with Windows using the Phone Link tool.

Here you can see your battery status, and recent messages and calls (see screenshot above right).

Microsoft uploaded a video to YouTube showing how it works (www.snipca.com/54813). For instructions on connecting your phone to Windows using Phone Link visit www.snipca.com/54812.



These changes will be available to Windows Insiders shortly, then added to Windows 11 later this year.

• **Hack Windows so it works exactly as you want – page 38**

TAKE 'PERFECT' SCREENSHOTS IN WINDOWS 11

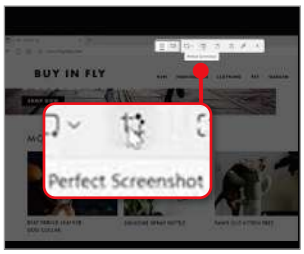
Microsoft is updating Snipping Tool so it takes "perfect" screenshots every time by adjusting the capture area to "tightly frame on-screen content".

It claims this will reduce the need to crop screenshots after you've taken them, though you can still do this to fine-tune the results.

To use it, you need to click the 'Perfect Screenshot' button at the top (see screenshot). This analyses the visible screen and "snaps around the most prominent content in view". Microsoft demonstrates how it works at www.snipca.com/54815.

However, it uses AI, so will be available only on Copilot+ computers. These are modern machines with special processors for running AI tasks.

Read Microsoft's blog for news of more AI tools coming soon: www.snipca.com/54814.



You'll like this...
Switching between classic and new Outlook will soon be easier (www.snipca.com/54816)

but not this...
There's been a "staggering" rise in sexual blackmail scams (www.snipca.com/54819)

YouTube blurs images of sexual content in search results

YouTube is now blurring thumbnail images for search results that "frequently include sexual themes".

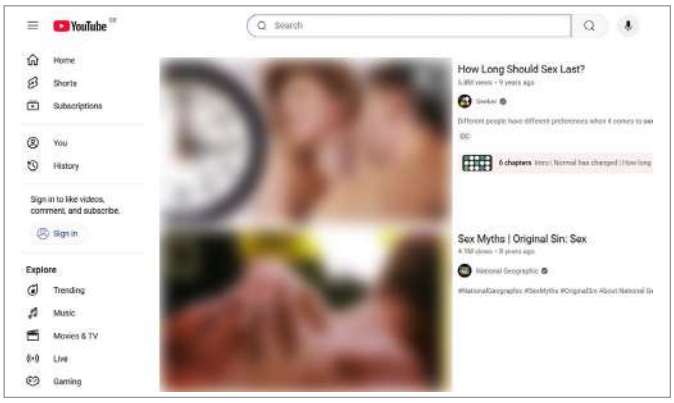
It announced the "experimental" feature in the Community section of the YouTube Help Center (www.snipca.com/54795), saying it's aimed at "providing safer search experiences for all users".

Viewers will still see the video title, channel name and description. Also, unlike Google's SafeSearch, it won't remove sexual content. Viewers will be able to unblur the thumbnails.

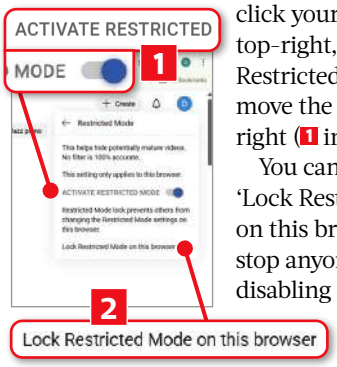
YouTube added that it will analyse the test feature to see whether it helps viewers avoid coming across content that doesn't break its rules, but is "sensitive in nature".

Only a "small percentage of viewers" will see the blurred thumbnails, it said.

It didn't mention what kind of results will produce blurred thumbnails. We blurred the images ourselves in our screenshot above, which appeared in a search for 'sex'.



YouTube already offers a Restricted Mode (www.snipca.com/54796) for blocking mature content, such as violence, sexual references, drugs, strong language and controversial subjects. It also hides comments on videos.



To turn it on when using YouTube in a web browser, click your profile icon top-right, then click Restricted Mode and move the slider to the right (1 in screenshot).

You can also click 'Lock Restricted Mode on this browser' to stop anyone else disabling it on that particular browser 2.

People could use AI chatbots as therapists, says Facebook's Zuckerberg

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg (pictured) has said people could talk to AI chatbots to tackle loneliness and seek emotional help instead of paying for therapy.

In a 75-minute interview with influential tech podcaster Dwarkesh Patel (www.snipca.com/54792), the Meta boss said chatbots could be useful for "talking through difficult conversations".

He acknowledged there's a "stigma" in confiding in AI, but predicted that "over time, we'll find the vocabulary as a society to articulate why they are valuable, why the people who are doing it are rational for doing it, and how it is actually adding value to their lives".

"The average American has, I think, fewer than three friends," he said, adding that most people need "meaningfully more".

In another interview with business analyst Ben Thompson (www.snipca.com/54793), Zuckerberg said AI chatbots are "like someone they can just talk to, but about whatever issues they're worried about".

"For people who don't have a therapist, I think everyone will have an AI," he added.

Meta launched its AI chatbot (www.meta.ai) in 2023, and added a phone app last month (www.snipca.com/54794).

The company drew widespread criticism earlier this year by adding the chatbot to WhatsApp with no option to remove it. You can however mute notifications from it and delete past chats – see page 62.

Would you confide in an AI chatbot? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

APPLE STARTS SELLING REFURBISHED IPHONE 15

Apple has added iPhone 15 models to its refurbished store. The cheapest is the standard iPhone with 128GB (pictured), priced £589 – £110 less than the full price. Visit www.snipca.com/54786 and choose a phone in the left-hand menu. Apple launched the iPhone 15 in 2023.

OPENREACH AXES COPPER IN 163 AREAS

Openreach has named the next 163 areas where BT will stop selling copper-based phone and broadband services, including exchanges in Clacton, Pontypool, Sunderland, Telford and Turnberry – see the full list at www.snipca.com/54785. It's the 20th 'tranche' of exchanges to stop selling services over copper wires, taking the total to over 1,500.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

The blurry arms in this photo belong to a robot going berserk, nearly decapitating its human controllers. The footage (www.snipca.com/54787) was leaked from a factory owned by Chinese firm Unitree. It was down to a coding error rather than robotic malevolence – or so we've been told.

IN BRIEF

STOP USING USB HUB FROM TIKTOK

Trading officials have recalled a popular USB hub being sold through TikTok because it poses a "serious risk of electric shock".

The Jia Le Xin Hub (pictured) has three plug sockets and six USB ports, but has a "noncompliant" plug that makes it dangerous. TikTok has removed the listing. Read more at www.snipca.com/54760.

UPDATE LG PHONE BEFORE FINAL DEADLINE

LG phones won't be able to install Android updates from 30 June. The South Korean firm stopped making new phones in 2021, and is now turning off its update servers, leaving the devices stuck on the Android version they're currently running. It means they won't receive any new tools or security fixes. LG says you should update your phone one final time before the 30 June deadline.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

According to Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), this woman is guilty of a hideous crime: using public transport without any digital stimulation. They're getting freaked out that older people can ride trains without phones, music, podcasts or e-readers. They call it 'barebacking' or 'rawdogging'. We just call it being normal.

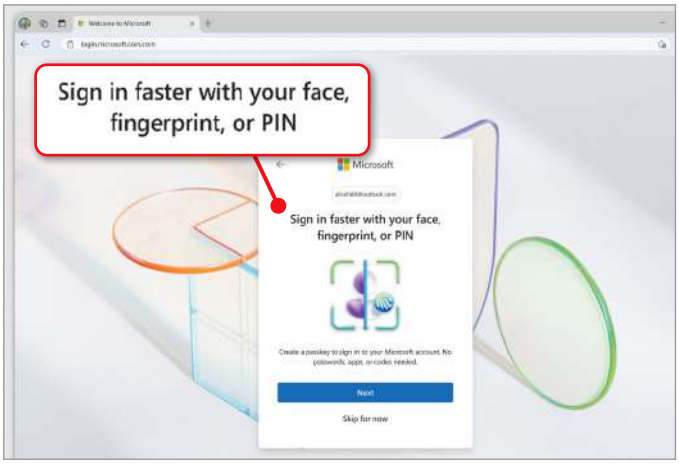
Microsoft makes passkeys default for new accounts

Microsoft will ask users creating new accounts to sign in with passkeys by default rather than passwords.

Passkeys are ways of signing in without a password, such as by receiving a message or PIN on another device.

Microsoft announced the move on Thursday 1 May, which tech companies have called World Password Day in recent years – though the company suggested it should be renamed 'World Passkey Day'.

It said new accounts are now "passwordless by default" and that new users "will have several passwordless options for signing into their account".


Sign in faster with your face, fingerprint, or PIN
Microsoft
Sign in faster with your face, fingerprint, or PIN
Next
Skip for now

These include using Windows Hello to sign in with face recognition or fingerprint, Microsoft added, as well as receiving codes by phone.

When you create an account Microsoft will "automatically detect the best available method on your account and set that as the default".

As an example, it said that "if you have a password and 'one time code' set up on your account, we'll prompt you to sign in with your one time code".

It didn't mention that users can still use passwords to create accounts, but it's likely to remain an option.

• **I like the simplicity of passkeys – Letters, page 13**

MICROSOFT REMOVES PASSWORDS FROM AUTHENTICATOR APP

Microsoft is removing password features from its Authenticator app (www.snipca.com/54763), forcing you to save them in Edge instead. From June you'll no longer be able to save new passwords in the app, then a month later you won't be able to use autofill. Finally, in August 2025 you'll lose access to any saved passwords. Read Microsoft's blog for details: www.snipca.com/54761.

Firefox would 'go bust' without Google money says boss

Firefox's finance boss said the browser could go out of business if Google is prevented from paying to be the default search engine in browsers.

It's one of several proposals from the US Department of Justice aimed at ending Google's monopoly in online search.

Currently, Google pays Firefox's owners Mozilla around $450m (£337m) a year to be the default search engine on the browser.

Mozilla's Chief Financial Offer Eric Muhlheim told a court that Firefox accounts for about 90 per cent of the company's revenue, and that 85 per cent of this comes from its agreement with Google.

Mulheim was testifying in the US Government's antitrust case against Google, which could end with the company being forced to sell Chrome.

He said the possibility of losing Google's payments was "very frightening" and would lead to "significant cuts across the company".

This could lead to a "downward spiral", he added, indicating that Mozilla might have to scale back innovation in Firefox, making it less attractive to users. Ultimately this could "put Firefox out of business", he claimed.

• **It's vital that Google is forced to sell Chrome – Letters, page 13**

BT works with Moira Stuart to promote ‘simple’ phone switch

BT has teamed up with veteran newsreader Moira Stuart (pictured) to raise awareness of the switch from copper-based landlines to digital phones. The company hopes the publicity campaign will reassure customers that for most people “switching to a digital landline is simple”.

It also wants people with additional needs to understand “what support is available to them and how they can make the move with confidence”.

The campaign coincides with a fresh effort this spring to roll out BT Digital Voice to vulnerable customers in four regions: East of England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Yorkshire & Humber.

Engineers will visit homes to offer support and supply battery-backup units to keep customers connected during power cuts.

This rollout will continue across the summer in East Midlands, London, North East England and Scotland, and in the autumn will reach North West England, South East England, South West England and West Midlands.

BT said that for anyone without broadband it will continue to provide a “dedicated landline service, requiring no new equipment or engineer visit”, allowing customers to “use their landline in the same way they do today until 2030”.

Moira Stuart said: “Like many people, I’ve relied on a landline for most of my life – so I was curious to understand what switching to Digital Voice really means.”

“I’ve learned that for most of us, it’s as easy as plugging your phone into your broadband router, and you’re good to go,” she added.

The phone switch-off was postponed last year to 31 January 2027 to give companies and councils more time to ensure 1.8 million telecare customers wouldn’t be adversely affected. Read more at www.snipca.com/54710.

Was the switch to BT Digital Voice simple for you? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Virgin Money joins scam–beating phone service 159

Virgin Money has joined the 159 phone service, which connects you safely and directly to your bank, ensuring you avoid scammers.

Stop Scams UK, which launched 159 in 2021, says the arrival of Virgin Money means 21 UK banks have now signed up, covering 99.2 per cent of current accounts.

It also announced that more than one million calls have been made to 159 since it launched, and that more than 1,600 people use it every day.

When you call 159 it asks you to say your bank’s name. When you reply, it attempts to put you through. The numbers were chosen intentionally to make tapping them easy to remember – going diagonally from top left on your phone pad to bottom right.

Ruth Evans, Chair of Stop Scams UK, said the popularity of the service “shows just how vital 159 has become in helping protect the public from criminals”.

Martin Lewis called using 159 a “no-brainer”. “Even if your bank calls you, and asks for details, just ask the person calling what department they’re in, then politely put the phone down and dial back via 159 to be sure,” he said. Read more at www.snipca.com/54743.

• **Read Issue 709’s ‘Block all spam calls’ Cover Feature – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54822.**

IN BRIEF

AI AGATHA CHRISTIE TEACHES BBC COURSE

The BBC has launched a writing course ‘presented’ by an AI version of crime writer Agatha Christie (pictured). It has 11 lessons and is part of the BBC’s Maestro service, which offers online courses by experts in subjects including business, public speaking and eating healthily. It costs £79, though you can subscribe to all 47 Maestro courses for £120. Read more at www.snipca.com/54742.

CLASSIC SITCOMS COME TO REWIND TV

Nostalgia TV channel Rewind has added the sitcoms *Please Sir!*, *Thick as Thieves*, and *Lucky Feller* (starring David Jason). It will soon add *In Loving Memory*, starring Thora Hird, and *Brass* with Timothy West. Rewind is on Freeview (channel 92), Freely (150) and Sky (182).

MAKE CALLS ONLINE ON WHATSAPP

You’ll soon be able to make phone and video calls through the browser version of WhatsApp. A preview build of the tool has call buttons on the main screen (as spotted by the website WABetaInfo, www.snipca.com/54745), though they’re not yet active. All you’ll need is a webcam and microphone. Currently, you need to use the PC or mobile version of WhatsApp program make calls.

Will you be scammed by M&S and Co-op hackers?

Security experts predict mass attacks as customer data stolen

Two of the most trusted brands on the high street have spent the past month trying to recover from devastating cyber-attacks. Both the Co-op and Marks & Spencer had to suspend online orders after a ransomware attack from the prolific gang DragonForce. Some stores had to switch to cash-only payments, while shelves were left bare as warehouses couldn't restock supplies.

This inconvenienced customers of both companies, but the long-term impact for Co-op shoppers could be more severe. This is because the attackers claim to have stolen the details of 20 million Co-op members, past and present. The company didn't confirm that figure, but has admitted that data from a "significant" number of its members has been taken.

> "The theft contains names and contact details, which is all scammers need to target customers"

The M&S hackers have caused huge disruption, costing the company millions of pounds, but the company says there's no evidence customer details were stolen. Nor has DragonForce boasted online about taking any data.

M&S customers shouldn't be complacent because further hacks or investigations might reveal data was stolen, but the more immediate danger is scammers unleashing a wave of attacks on Co-op customers.

The company said the stolen information doesn't include passwords or bank and credit-card details. But it does contain names and contact details, which is all scammers need to target customers. This data is likely to be sold on the dark web to gangs who could combine it with details stolen in other attacks – and these *could* include passwords and bank details.

What's worrying is that scammers are getting better at identifying individuals using data taken from different sources. They use software that 'scrapes' the entire web looking for data. These details don't just come from data thefts; they can also be grabbed from social-media profiles and public records.

Scammers quote details like phone numbers, National Insurance numbers and bank details to make their messages seem personalised and convincing. They can also use this information to open accounts in your name.

The Information Commissioner's Office, which acts as the UK's data watchdog, has warned anyone worried about scams to take steps to protect themselves, such as changing their password. You'll find instructions on the Co-op's membership page (www.snipca.com/54826).

You're probably already suspicious of unexpected emails or phone calls, especially if they claim to be from your bank or a tech company you've got a subscription with. You should now add the Co-op to that list, especially if you're a member.

And bear in mind that scammers are increasingly using text messages and WhatsApp. Also keep an eye on https://haveibeenpwned.com to see whether it adds a batch of stolen Co-op data you can search.

THE FACTS

- Both Co-op and M&S have been attacked by the gang DragonForce, which installed ransomware on the companies' computer systems
- The hackers claim to have stolen data from up to 20 million past and present Co-op customers, while M&S was forced to suspend online sales
- Security experts have warned that scammers can use the hacked data to launch attacks on individuals

The company has published an FAQ on the attack (www.snipca.com/54828), and an online form where you can ask further questions (www.snipca.com/54825 – you'll need your membership number).

You should also read the statement from Shirine Khoury-Haq, head of the Co-operative Group (www.snipca.com/54824). She called the attack "highly sophisticated" and said her colleagues are "working tirelessly" to protect the company, understand the extent of the impact and help authorities with their investigations.

By law it will have to keep customers updated, so keep checking the site over the next few weeks. The scale of both hacks may not be known for several months, but its effects are likely to be more serious than a temporary shortage of bread or milk.

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

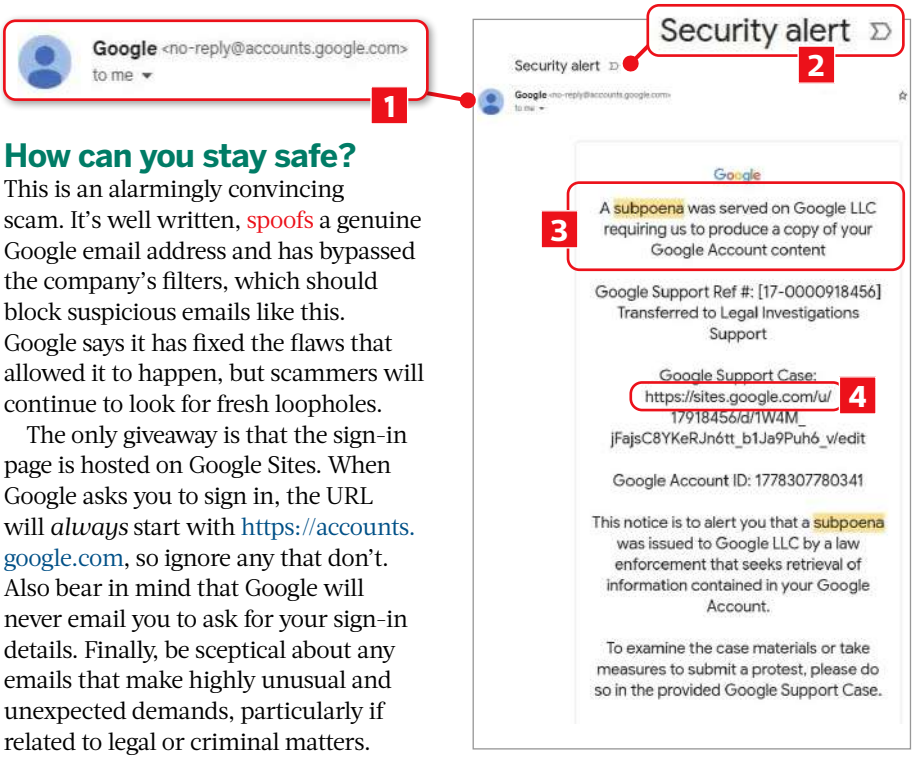
Fake 'subpoena' emails from Google

What's the threat?

Scammers are using a genuine Google email address and support page to trick people into thinking they've been served a subpoena that gives Google access to your data. Subpoenas – called witness summonses in the UK – are legal documents usually served in the US, though the scam is targeting people on both sides of the Atlantic.

The message appears to come from no-reply@accounts.google.com (1 in our screenshot right), a legitimate Google address, and has the heading 'Security alert' 2. It claims the subpoena demands you grant Google permission to "produce a copy of your Google Account content" 3.

Clicking the link to your 'Google Support Case' would take you to a webpage hosted on Google Sites (https://sites.google.com) 4. This says you can "examine the case materials or submit a protest" and prompts you to log into your account.


Google <no-reply@accounts.google.com>
to me
1
Security alert
2
Security alert
Google
A subpoena was served on Google LLC requiring us to produce a copy of your Google Account content
3
Google Support Ref #: [17-0000918456]
Transferred to Legal Investigations Support
Google Support Case:
https://sites.google.com/u/17918456/d/1W4M_jFajsC8YKeRJn6tt_b1Ja9Puh6_v/edit
4
Google Account ID: 1778307780341
This notice is to alert you that a subpoena was issued to Google LLC by a law enforcement that seeks retrieval of information contained in your Google Account.
To examine the case materials or take measures to submit a protest, please do so in the provided Google Support Case.

How can you stay safe?

This is an alarmingly convincing scam. It's well written, spoofs a genuine Google email address and has bypassed the company's filters, which should block suspicious emails like this. Google says it has fixed the flaws that allowed it to happen, but scammers will continue to look for fresh loopholes.

The only giveaway is that the sign-in page is hosted on Google Sites. When Google asks you to sign in, the URL will *always* start with https://accounts.google.com, so ignore any that don't. Also bear in mind that Google will never email you to ask for your sign-in details. Finally, be sceptical about any emails that make highly unusual and unexpected demands, particularly if related to legal or criminal matters.

New tools | Recover lost passwords on hard drives

Version 135 of Chrome, released in April, added 'app-bound encryption', which ties password encryption to a specific app and device. This is a useful feature, but it has forced some independent developers to update their security tools so they continue to work in Chrome (and other browsers based on it, such as Brave, Edge and Opera).

One of these is NirSoft, which has updated ExtPassword (see screenshot), a tool for recovering passwords stored on external drives including USB sticks. You'll find the download link by scrolling down at www.snipca.com/54722. However, both Chrome and Windows are very cautious about programs that handle passwords, and they're likely to block the download. It's perfectly safe, so temporarily turn off Chrome and Windows' protection while you download it.

In Chrome, type chrome://settings/security in the address bar then select 'No protection' followed by 'Turn off'. In Windows 11, search for and open 'Security' then click 'Virus & threat protection' followed by 'Manage settings' under 'Virus & threat protection settings'. Now switch off 'Real-time protection'. Make sure you switch both features back on as soon as you've downloaded and launched ExtPassword.

ScamWatch

Readers warn readers

Martin Lewis in handcuffs

Computeractive has warned us many times about fake adverts featuring Martin Lewis, so I wasn't going to be fooled by an image appearing to show him in handcuffs being led away by police. It uses the headline 'Is this the end of Martin's career?' to try to intrigue you. He posted about it online (www.snipca.com/54682), saying it's an investment scam. I have no idea why the news of Martin being arrested would make you want to invest your money, but who knows what goes through the mind of a scammer. It's one of the most absurd scams I've ever seen.

Matthew Walters

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

Saying 'please' to ChatGPT is completely mad...

I could barely believe what I was reading in Issue 709 (page 8) about people using 'please' and 'thank you' in their requests to ChatGPT. What do they think ChatGPT is? It's just a collection of algorithms and code, and is no more human than my toaster, kettle or hoover. It doesn't care whether you're polite to it. Adding 'please' to a question makes no difference to what it gives you. It's completely mad, and as pointless as being polite to Alexa or Siri.

In my experience, the best way to use ChatGPT is to be blunt and unambiguous. You certainly don't need to treat it as though it has a human-like personality. You don't even need to use punctuation or correct spelling. It always seems to understand what I'm asking, no matter how many mistakes I make when typing.

Neil Spencer

CA SAYS **We asked ChatGPT and it said "politeness doesn't affect how I respond – I'll give the same level of effort and accuracy either way". However, it added that if you say please and thank you it will respond in a similarly friendly style. Indeed, it said it can adapt to almost any style you use, including "affable, blunt, sarcastic, formal, jokey, technical and analytical". So, being polite won't make ChatGPT better, but it will nudge it to respond in kind.**

...and it's as stupid as Baldrick

I'm intrigued by the current emphasis on AI. We've actually had AI for decades. All the tech companies have done recently is modify the front end of your average search engine and market it as AI because it makes a haphazard approximation of human conversation.

The real question though is how well it works. In Issue 708's Star Letter Ralph Johnson called ChatGPT "as creepy as HAL", but that gives it far too much credit. I'd call it as stupid as Baldrick (pictured right) or Lord Percy in *Blackadder*.

Recently, I've been teaching myself to code in Python using ChatGPT to fill in some of the blanks. It has proved itself to be incorrect more often than not, sending me down endless rabbit holes. It recently answered the same question incorrectly over 20 times and then blamed me for getting it wrong! Far from being a timesaver, it's like a bemused drunk who's trying to be helpful and can't understand why he's talking nonsense.

I also asked ChatGPT to help me find a quiet hotel to have a pint and use the web. It gave me three recommendations, none of which is still trading. One of them was knocked down three years ago and turned into a housing estate.

Maybe the technology will come of age in a few years, but right now I can only dream of the voice-activated computer in *Star Trek*. I would give ChatGPT one major plaudit though: it's a hundred times more accurate than Microsoft's Copilot!

Martin Short

CA SAYS **ChatGPT is certainly not perfect, but nor does it claim to be. And we think it's a little harsh to compare it to Baldrick. We just asked whether it had a cunning plan, and it replied: "I always do – just depends what you're plotting. Fancy something Baldrick-level daft or Blackadder-sharp and scheming?". Our own cunning plan is to turn to page 60 and remove overrated and pointless AI tools that don't come close to ChatGPT.**

Why I agree with eBay's courier changes

I was interested to read the views of Brian Scott, who plans to stop selling on eBay over its courier changes (Letters, Issue 709), but I take a different view. I've also been selling collectibles on eBay for years (mainly coins and military gear) and while I agree that the changes aren't perfect, they're not the disaster they've been made out to be.

EBay's push to use approved couriers seems aimed at making postage more reliable and reducing disputes. When something goes missing in the post, it's always the seller who ends up footing the bill, even if it's Royal Mail's fault. With tracked delivery from recognised couriers, at least there's a proper chain of accountability.

Yes, it might mean a bit more effort, and in some cases slightly higher costs, but for items over £10, I'd rather have peace of mind than take my chances. The days when you could drop everything in a postbox and hope for the best are gone. Buyers expect tracking and protection, and sellers benefit too, especially when buyers make false claims.

Kevin Williams

What's the Issue...?

I recall a Workshop on Super God Mode, but fear I may have thrown out that issue. Can you jog my memory as to which one it was?

Anthony Evans

CA SAYS **It was in Issue 689's Easy When You Know How column, page 74.**

When did Robert Irvine explain how to use a VPN on his TV to watch US programmes?

James Callaghan

CA SAYS **Yes, it was in Issue 694, page 38.**

We've moved into a remote village where mobile signals are patchy. When was your feature on making phone calls without a signal?

CA SAYS **In Issue 685, page 60. Read it and the features above on our 2024 Back Issue Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.**

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Is it progress to remove ports and drives from laptops?

Due to problems upgrading to Windows 11, I've moved from an HP laptop to an Asus model. This new machine is distinctly faster and more stable than my old HP laptop, but there are issues. My old machine had a DVD drive, an Ethernet port and a memory card slot for transferring pictures from my camera – all of which I used.

In order to use these features I now have to connect from the Asus USB-C port to an external adapter, which has connections for a DVD drive and an Ethernet port. I have also added to the port an external DVD drive and SD card reader. These connections have resulted in a cat's cradle of wires around the laptop, none of which were required before. This is progress?

Martin Wilkins

No need for me to switch from Freeview to streaming

In response to Richard Clark's letter that Freeview will soon be a thing of the past (Issue 708), I have to say my TV is on for around five hours a day and I only have Freeview. It costs the price of a TV licence and electricity – nothing else.

By contrast, how much would streaming cost? I'd probably use about 70GB a month to stream that many hours of TV. Fortunately, I have unlimited broadband, though I would need to buy a new TV to watch streaming.

Many people I know don't have broadband, but they all have a TV. I think Freeview will be with us for a long time to come. If the Government and banks want us to do everything online then fair enough, but let them pay for it.

Barry Mallon

I like the simplicity of passkeys

In Issue 708, Gordon Shackleton wrote about the "disasters" he's suffered using passkeys. But I think he might be missing an important feature. I have many logins on my phone and laptop that are accessed using passkeys for convenience, and they have a useful backup, which is to tap cancel when presented with the passkey screen. This then requires me to enter my password or PIN or some other way of logging in.

I've yet to find a login whereby I'm locked out because I can't use a passkey – which in my opinion is just as well. Maybe Gordon has been unlucky with his passkeys, but I love them for their simplicity.

Paul Davies

CA SAYS **Our readers seem split on passkeys: for some they're a convenient replacement for passwords; for others they're an inconvenient overreaction to privacy concerns. Wherever you stand, you'll probably end up being forced to use passkeys eventually, given Microsoft's recent decision to use them as the default for new accounts – see page 8.**

STAR LETTER

It's vital that Google is forced to sell Chrome

Question of the Fortnight
Will Yahoo or OpenAI buy Google Chrome?
Only one could seriously snap up the world's biggest browser
FOR SALE
CHROME
(ONE CAREFUL OWNER)
THE FACTS

When I took my first baby steps online I used Netscape's browser. This was in 1997, and I read many articles by apparent experts saying it would be the only browser you'd need to use. About a year later those same experts were hailing Microsoft's masterstroke at building Internet Explorer into Windows, predicting it would dominate for decades. None of them could have anticipated that the world's leading browser would eventually come from a small new company called Google.

There was a lot of innovation during this period, as companies tried to leapfrog each other. It was exciting and led to great improvements for ordinary users. But that came to a halt about 15 years ago when the tech giants grew so enormous it was obviously in their interests to crush all smaller competition.

That's why it's so vital for the US government to follow through with its threat to make Google sell Chrome ('Question of the Fortnight', Issue 709, pictured). Google owning both the biggest browser and search engine is like a company owning both the roads and all the billboards that appear along it. They control not just your route, but also the adverts you see as you drive.

I don't know who is best fit to buy Chrome, but I agree with your view that OpenAI is a more serious contender than Yahoo. It needs to go to a new company that is both big enough to invest properly in it, but doesn't have as many conflicted interests as the likes of Apple, Meta and Microsoft. I might even be persuaded to use it again, having switched to Brave for the past few years.

Bob Wheeler

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Why does Facebook allow 'free bus travel' ads?

The 'free bus travel' scam you warned about in Issue 709 (page 11) has to be one of the most widespread cons ever seen online. I've seen this advert (pictured left) many times on Facebook, and it's become a running joke with friends and family. They are everywhere and it staggers me that Facebook thinks they don't break its advertising policy. Doesn't Facebook realise the adverts are for a non-existent product?

It makes me consider advertising a machine that could turn base metals into gold or an elixir to cure all diseases. If Facebook's rules are so soft, what's to stop me?

Doug Chalmers

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Should I contact manufacturer or retailer about warranty?

LEAD CASE

Q I was interested to read about recent cases where 12-month Lenovo warranties started before the customer had even bought their laptop. I think I have the same problem, but I was wondering whether I should contact the retailer (Currys) for a solution, or go straight to Lenovo? The latter might end up being quicker.

Chris Rowland

A Yes, contacting the manufacturer might be quicker, and they should be able to tell you when your warranty started. Give them your purchase date and they should be able to reset your warranty.

Legal responsibility rests with the retailer, however, so involve them too. You could for example ask the retailer to contact the manufacturer on your behalf. Or you could get confirmation from the manufacturer about when the warranty started and show this to the retailer. You should point out that it's misleading to show the wrong length of warranty in a product's description.

Whichever you choose, only the retailer can offer money back as damages for the reduced warranty. If the warranty expires before you've had 12 months' cover and you have to pay to fix a problem, you can ask the retailer for this money as damages. Alternatively, the seller may have to fulfil the services covered by the warranty for the period of the missing months. All these rights are now covered in the new Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Act (DMCA), which has superseded the 2008 Unfair Trading Regulations.

The problem of half-used warranties seems to be growing. It stems from warranties not being updated when a laptop is sold after spending months in a warehouse. We'll keep digging into these cases and update you when we have more information.

CASE ONGOING

Can Vodafone keep my money now I've left?

Q I transferred my mobile pay-as-you-go number from Vodafone on 3 March, and received a text informing me I could claim a refund for any credit balance I had (a mere £11.60). I did this, and the company told me it would be in my account within 10 days, but I haven't received it. Can Vodafone keep my money?

Gerry Walker

A No. If a mobile provider owes you money, you have between 30 to 60 days to ask for it back. Gerry has done this, so Vodafone needs to pay him. He shouldn't have to contact the company again, so we'll do it on his behalf and ask why it's taking so long.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, try sending a formal letter of complaint to the company's boss. If that doesn't work, ask the company for a deadlock letter to confirm what it has done to resolve your case, and then show it to whichever Ombudsman the company is signed up with. It will be either CISAS or the Communications Ombudsman, because by law, all providers must belong to one. Vodafone belongs to the latter.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

Honor refunds reader £500 as a goodwill gesture

Honor has agreed to refund reader Paul Vismeg the £500 he spent on a Magic Book X16 laptop (pictured) last November, though it calls the move a goodwill gesture (see Issue 709). We disagree and think Honor had no choice but to pay.

Paul returned the laptop in December under warranty when it stopped working. Honor sent it back, claiming to have repaired it, but the screen was damaged. It then refused Paul's request for a replacement, and said he was entitled only to another repair.

It seems Honor was using the warranty as grounds to insist on a repair. This may be in the warranty's small print, but Honor is also the retailer in this case, not just the manufacturer. That means Paul could simply switch to the Consumer Rights Act (CRA), which applies to retailers. UK law always trumps warranty, and in most cases it should be the first thing you use when seeking help.

When we contacted Honor, it told us it didn't accept returned products after 14 days. But this refers to the Consumer Contract Regulations, which has nothing to do with faulty goods. We pointed this out but heard nothing back, though Paul later told us Honor had refunded him. The fact it thinks this was a goodwill gesture suggests it hasn't learned its lesson though. We wouldn't be surprised to receive similar cases in future.

Should NordVPN refund me for printer issue?

Q I've got a two-year standard contract with NordVPN (https://nordvpn.com) which expires in November. In early April I suddenly found I was unable to print or scan using my Canon MX475 and spent the best part of a week trying to find the cause. It turned out to be my NordVPN. The company says it's aware of the problem, but has refused me compensation or to extend my licence – or even say when it will be fixed. What can I do about this?

Peter Capps

A We think Peter has a case for saying NordVPN is no longer fit for purpose and isn't as described.. He might not have this if NordVPN had *always* stopped his printer working, but it sounds as if a recent update has caused the problem.

To be clear, NordVPN itself still works. But the definition of being no longer fit for purpose and not as described extends to causing problems with other software or devices that the product interacts with.

Peter would need to prove this though, and could point to NordVPN's page explaining the problems wireless printers can have when VPNs are running (www.snipca.com/54726). We'll also ask NordVPN for clarification. If it admits fault it will have to refund Peter, or perhaps offer him a discount on his new subscription or a new download to fix the problem.

CASE ONGOING

Can Currys refuse to exchange unsuitable item?

Q My sister has a terminal illness and since diagnosis has found sleeping difficult due to overheating. She decided to buy an air-conditioning unit to help, and after some research chose the De'Longhi Pinguino ES72 8300 BTU (www.snipca.com/54721, pictured), paying £459 in her local Currys. She found it was unsuitable but Currys has refused to let her change it. Can Currys do this?

Roly Savage

A Yes it can. When you buy an item in person from a shop, you are deemed to have had the chance to inspect it. The rules are different when buying items online, where the Consumer Contract Regulations give you 14 days to reject a product even if there's nothing wrong with it.

However, we think Currys should be more understanding. After all, there's little difference between Currys opening the box in store for Roly's sister to examine the product, and her doing so later at home. If the box hasn't been damaged and the item is unused, then Currys would be able to resell it as new. If not, it could deduct a reasonable amount from the resale price.

Currys has the law on its side, but we're going to ask it to help Roly's sister as a goodwill gesture. After all, she only wanted an exchange, not a refund, so it wasn't even losing a sale.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Nextbase replaced cable for out-of-warranty dashcam

My Nextbase 622GW dashcam (www.snipca.com/54690, pictured) was nearly two years old when the rear camera developed a fault. I contacted Nextbase and described the issue. After an exchange of emails, they diagnosed the problem as a faulty cable connecting the rear camera to the dashcam.

I was a bit sceptical that they could diagnose the issue without physically testing the device. However, they said they would send me a replacement cable, even though the device was well out of warranty. It arrived a few days later. I was very busy at the time, so I replied to let them know it would be a while before I could install the cable and test the dashcam. I received a nice response encouraging me to take all the time I needed to test it properly.

Their diagnosis was correct – the dashcam worked.

Peter McDonough

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Nextbase

- **Online form** www.snipca.com/54691
- **Phone** 02920 866 429

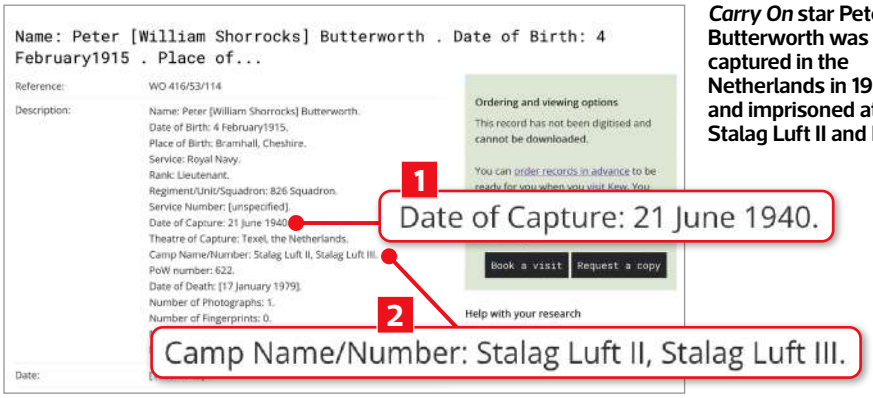
Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestor was captured by the Germans or Japanese during World War 2, follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search Prisoner of War cards

The National Archives holds more than 200,000 German Record Cards in its WO 416 collection, and 50,000 Japanese cards in WO 345. Most of these are for British military personnel, though some are for individuals serving in the Merchant Navy and others from Commonwealth countries. The amount of information on the cards varies. Some contain very little detail, while others include chest x-rays, fingerprints and photographs.

The Archives' index shows how many cards there are for each person, and whether a card contains extra details. Entries also contain name, date and place of birth, branch of service, rank, regiment and service number.


Name: Peter [William Shorrocks] Butterworth . Date of Birth: 4 February1915 . Place of...
Reference: WO 416/53/114
Description:
Name: Peter [William Shorrocks] Butterworth.
Date of Birth: 4 February1915.
Place of Birth: Bramhall, Cheshire.
Service: Royal Navy.
Rank: Lieutenant.
Regiment/Unit/Squadron: 826 Squadron.
Service Number: [unspecified].
Date of Capture: 21 June 1940.
Theatre of Capture: Texel, the Netherlands.
Camp Name/Number: Stalag Luft II, Stalag Luft III.
PoW number: 622.
Date of Death: [17 January 1979].
Number of Photographs: 1.
Number of Fingerprints: 0.
Ordering and viewing options
This record has not been digitised and cannot be downloaded.
You can order records in advance to be
Book a visit
Request a copy
Help with your research
Date:
1
Date of Capture: 21 June 1940.
2
Camp Name/Number: Stalag Luft II, Stalag Luft III.

***Carry On* star Peter Butterworth was captured in the Netherlands in 1940 and imprisoned at Stalag Luft II and III**

Browse German Record Cards

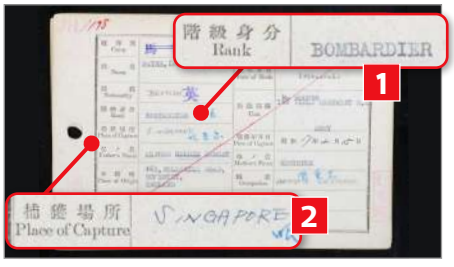
To search the German index, visit www.snipca.com/54692 and type a name, place of birth or service number. I searched for the actor and comedian Peter Butterworth, famous for his appearances in the *Carry On* films, who I knew played a key role in an escape from Stalag Luft III, which was later depicted in the classic 1963 film *The Great Escape*. The entry for Butterworth's cards (www.snipca.com/54693) shows he was captured in Texel, Netherlands, on 21 June 1940 (1 in our screenshot above) and was held in both Stalag Luft II and III 2.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of a German Record Card, either visit the National Archives in person or order a copy through the website (see www.snipca.com/54694). The fee includes a non-refundable page check that costs £8.40, plus the cost for copying each page, which is currently £1.20 for digital images.

Search Japanese cards on Findmypast

To search the National Archives' Japanese index visit www.snipca.com/54699. If you have a Findmypast subscription, you'll find cards of these records in the 'Prisoners Of War 1715-1945' collection (www.snipca.com/54695). Filter by 'Conflict' by selecting 'World War 2', then search by name or service number. You can also filter by rank and regiment.

I searched for Irving William Payne, who I'd come across previously. One of the 14 results was for Payne's index card, which told me he was a Bombardier in the Royal Artillery (1 in our screenshot below). He was captured on 15 February 1942 during the fall of Singapore 2 and sadly died in captivity on 12 September 1944, as recorded on the back of the card. Red diagonal lines across the front of a card indicated that the POW had died.



Irving William Payne was captured by the Japanese in 1942 and died two years later

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My great-uncle, John McCall, left Scotland for England in the mid-1920s. I've found him in the 1939 Register taken at the outbreak of war, but can't find much record of his earlier life in Scotland. All I know is he lived in Stirling. Where should I start?

Thomas Anderson

Have a look in the 1921 Census for Scotland, which was uploaded in 2023 at Scotland's People. First, register at www.snipca.com/54704 then visit www.snipca.com/54702. Tick 1921 (and earlier if you want) then search for his name. Now click 'County/City' to list results alphabetically by location, then scroll down to page 8. We found eight John McCalls living in Stirling, aged from six to 80. To see the census result and obtain a certificate, you'll need to buy a credit for £12.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Find ancestors who were teachers

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

SOFTWARE UPDATER

UniGetUI 3.2

www.snipca.com/54788
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

UniGetUI lets you install and update thousands of programs using package managers. These download the latest versions of software directly from the developers without any bundled junk – the most popular being the Windows Package Manager, better known as WinGet.

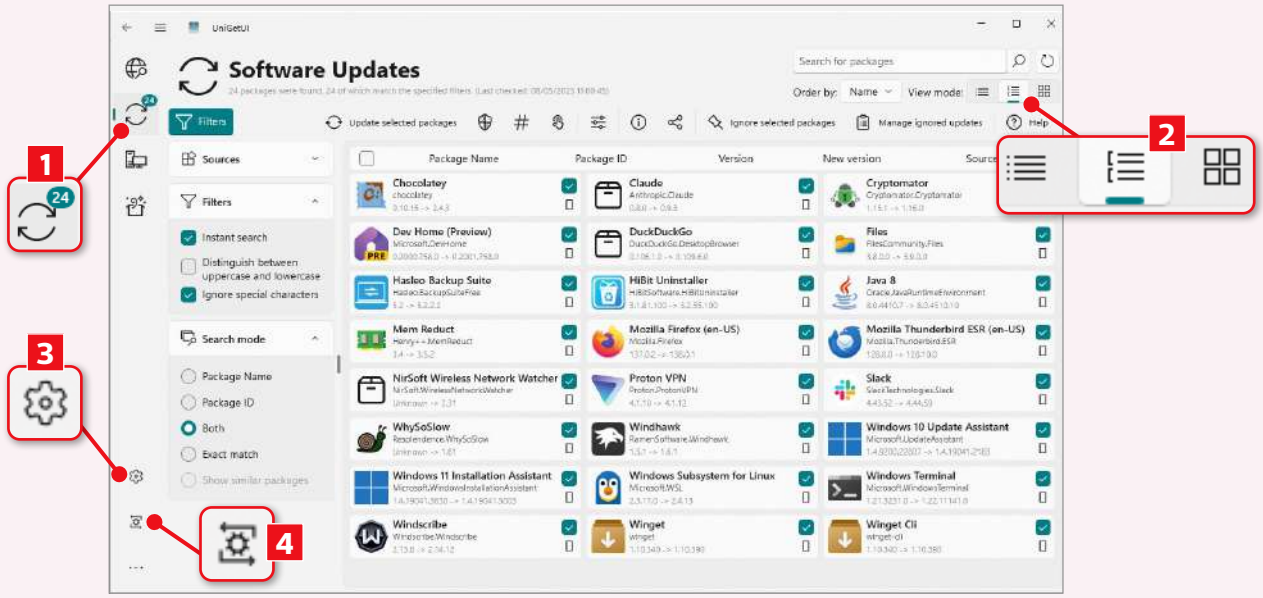
This major update makes several improvements to UniGetUI's interface, making it easier to use. You can now switch between viewing a list of packages and a grid or tiled layout. Not only do these layouts look better, but they also help you identify programs instantly from their logos (where available).

UniGetUI has added a Back button to the top-left corner of its main window to speed up navigation. It has also streamlined its code so the program takes up less disk space, uses less memory and is faster to load.

The Settings screen has been redesigned to reduce clutter and make finding and tweaking options much easier. Previously, the settings were stacked in one long list, but now each section opens in its own page. UniGetUI has also replaced the tick boxes for individual settings with On/Off toggle switches.

Another change is to the Filters panel on the left-hand side of the interface. This lets you filter the packages you search for, or any you have installed, by source (such as WinGet or Chocolatey), name or ID, and filter your searches – for example to differentiate between upper and lowercase characters. Recognising that not everyone needs these options, UniGetUI now lets you hide the panel by clicking the Filters button, and conceals it automatically when you reduce the window size.

Finally, UniGetUI has refined its automatic-updates feature so you can pause updates to software packages when your laptop is in 'battery saver' mode or when you're using a metered network connection. To activate these options, go into Settings and click 'Package update preferences'.



1 UniGetUI's Software Updates tab tells you which of the programs installed on your PC have new packages available. You can update them all at once by clicking 'Update software packages' or untick the 'Select all' box to update them individually.

2 UniGetUI 3.2 lets you customise how its package lists are presented. Use the options in the top-right corner to switch between the default List layout, Grid and Icons. The latter makes program logos larger but removes package ID details.

3 Click the Settings cog to open UniGetUI's redesigned Settings screen. Open 'Package update preferences' to specify how often it should check for new versions of packages and to enable automatic updates (see above).

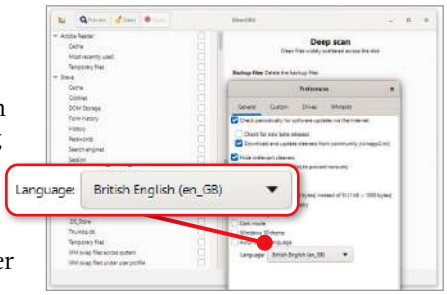
4 You can now access all available package managers by clicking this button in UniGetUI's bottom-left corner. Options include WinGet, Chocolatey and Scoop, but WinGet is generally all you need to install and update software.

SYSTEM CLEANER

BleachBit 5.0.0

www.snipca.com/54779

What you need: Windows 8.1, 10 or 11, or Linux



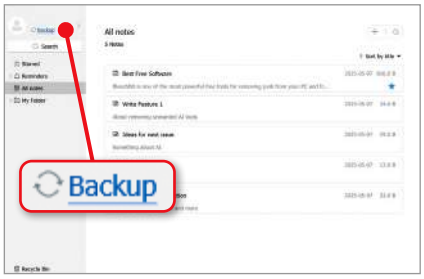
BleachBit is one of the most powerful free tools for removing junk from your PC and freeing up disk space. Although version 5.0.0 isn't as big a release as its number implies, it makes several welcome improvements to the program. These include an updated Windows 10 theme for those who don't like the Windows 11-style rounded corners and muted colours. Click the menu button top-left, choose Preferences and tick 'Windows 10 theme' on the General tab. Note that BleachBit no longer supports Windows XP or 7. You can now close the program instantly using the keyboard shortcuts Ctrl+Q and Ctrl+W, and change its display language in Preferences – including to British English (see screenshot). Most importantly, BleachBit is now faster and more thorough than ever at cleaning temporary program and system files.

NOTE-TAKING TOOL

Wise Note 1.01

www.snipca.com/54782

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



This new program from the company behind Wise Disk Cleaner provides a simple way to take notes and schedule reminders. Whereas many such tools focus on syncing notes across devices, Wise Note works entirely on your PC – though you have the option of backing up notes to OneDrive or Dropbox (see screenshot). It lets you customise the font, size and colour of the text in your notes, insert images and web links, and create numbered, bulleted and tick-box lists. You can then organise your notes into folders, add stars to the important ones and sort them by title, date created or size. Wise Note's Reminders feature lets you schedule one-off and repeat reminders, then shows a desktop notification when tasks are due. Although not as sophisticated as Microsoft OneNote, Wise Note will still help you stay organised.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

USB Safely Remove

www.snipca.com/54784

Price: £19.08 a year **Free trial:** 30 days

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

We always test programs in this section with an open mind, but we installed USB Safely Remove with a degree of scepticism. What could justify paying for a tool that safely removes USB sticks from your PC, when you can do it for free in a couple of clicks?

However, USB Safely Remove has more features than its name suggests, and can prevent data loss when you unplug a device before files have been successfully transferred. It works not only with USB sticks but any type of plug-and-play external drive, so it's useful for managing multiple devices.

While Windows often gives USB drives a generic 'USB Mass Storage Device' label, USB Safely Remove displays actual device names with icons. You can hide specific drives from its menu and add devices to the menu that Windows has hidden. It lets you stop all or individual drives with a single click so you can remove them safely.

The program can also turn off a device as soon as it's stopped, and terminate Windows processes that are preventing safe removal. Click the Return button on its toolbar (see screenshot) to reactivate a device without needing to unplug and reinsert it.

More advanced options let you control USB drives from the command line and configure backup software to run automatically before you disconnect a device.

USB Safely Remove
Command View Help
Return Disable Browse Properties Stop All Refresh Cmd Line Options
Displayed in the menu
USB SanDisk 3.2Gen1 USB Device (F:)
Hidden from the menu
HP Wide Vision HD Camera
USB Composite Device
USB Composite Device
Bluetooth Device (Personal Area Network)
Return
USB Safely Remove
Device can now be safely removed
USB SanDisk 3.2Gen1 USB Device

OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Despite its benefits, USB Safely Remove isn't worth paying for – even Microsoft has said you don't need to eject USB sticks 'safely' any more. It would make an excellent free tool, but there are better ways to spend nearly £20 a year.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

What can I replace Skype with?

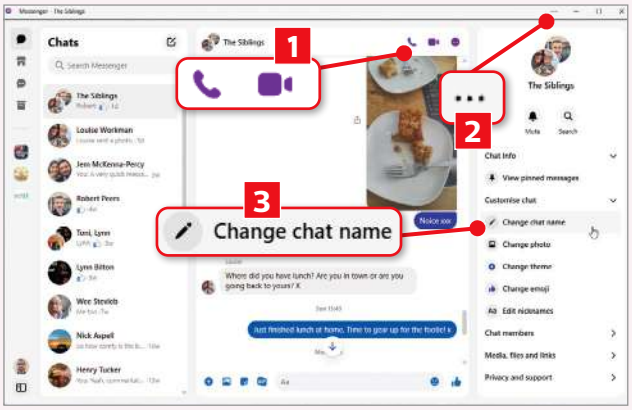
Q **I'm concerned about Microsoft's decision to scrap Skype. My mum uses it as an instant messenger and video-call service as she doesn't have a smartphone, and therefore can't use WhatsApp. Microsoft offering Teams as an alternative isn't really practical because I use my Teams account purely for work. I've set her up with a Zoom account because it seems to be the easiest to use, but are there any better alternatives?**

Phil Bowers

A Zoom (www.zoom.com) is geared more towards business use, but if your mum is comfortable using it and can connect to anyone she needs to, then she should probably stick with it. For those still searching for an alternative, Zoom's workplace focus might be off-putting. The same is true for Google Meet (https://meet.google.com) – on the surface it might appeal to those with a Google account, but it's primarily a video-conferencing tool.

If your mum has a Facebook account and is happy to connect to other Facebook users only, Messenger might be a better option. You can access it through your browser (at www.messenger.com) or by installing the desktop program from the Microsoft Store (www.snipca.com/54659). It looks similar to Skype and has a focus on instant messages.

Click the buttons at the top to start a phone or video chat (1 in our screenshot). To talk to more than one person in a group chat, click Compose then select your contacts. To give this group a name click the three-dot button 2, then expand 'Customise chat' and choose 'Change chat name' 3.

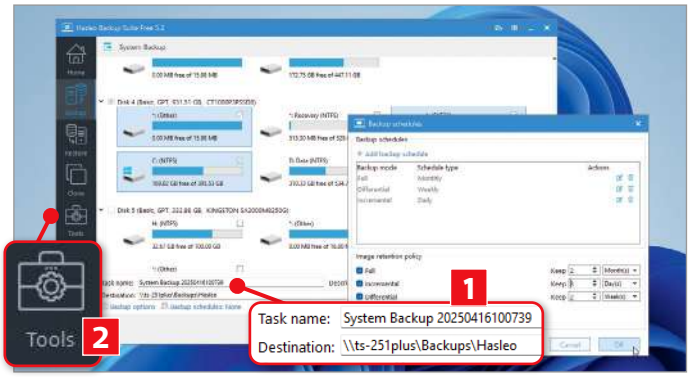


How do I back up to my NAS?

Q **Can you suggest (ideally free) software for backing up my system and folders (full and incremental) to my Synology DS216J NAS drive. I'd also want to restore backups from the same NAS.**

Ron Hagley

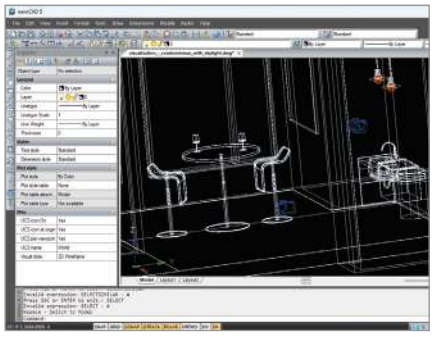
A We recommend Hasleo Backup Suite (www.snipca.com/53669), which can back up to your NAS drive's shared folders (1 in our screenshot). Make sure you create the Emergency Disk on a spare USB stick from the Tools menu 2 so you can restore your PC if you're ever unable to boot into Windows.



Is there a free alternative to AutoCAD?

Q **My son has recently left a job where he used Autodesk AutoCAD design tool (www.snipca.com/54511). Is there a free alternative he can use privately at home?**

Stuart Robertson



A Yes, try nanoCAD v.5 (www.snipca.com/54645, pictured). This is the full release of an older version of professional software that's easy to get to grips with if you've used AutoCAD, and has all the core tools your son will need. He'll need to sign up for a free account to register a free 12-month licence, which can be renewed for free in a year's time.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

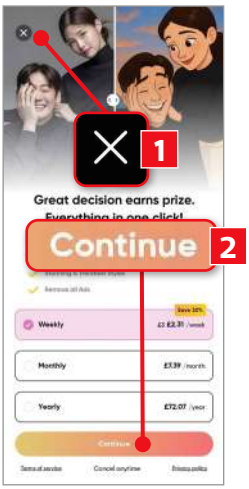
SOFTWARE WARNING!

Genius – AI Photo Editor's unintelligent AI tools

I'd say there are three levels of AI at the moment. Top of the pile are the programs, mostly chatbots and image editors, that are rapidly redefining what computers can do. Just below these are inferior tools that genuinely use AI but do so badly, and simply clutter up your screen (see page 60). And at the bottom are the useless copycat apps that cynically shove 'AI' into their name to benefit from the hype.

The misleadingly named 'Genius – AI Photo Editor' (www.snipca.com/54706) belongs to this final group. Somehow it was the fourth most-downloaded free app in the Google Play Store when I last checked. It's one of nine so-called AI photo-editing tools made by Vietnamese firm Apero Vision Lab.

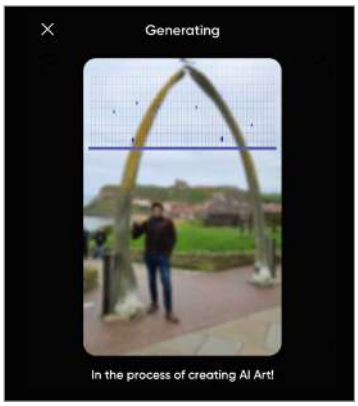
The company is evidently proud of the underlying technology, mentioning 'AI' 40 times in its 491-word description of the app. But not once does it clearly say what the AI does.



You can click the 'X' to close the subscribe box, but it doesn't appear for three seconds

We suspect it doesn't need much AI to perform its basic editing tasks, which include adding tattoos and turning photos into cartoons. It *would* need some AI magic to turn typed commands into images, as promised, but I was bombarded by too many adverts to find even this feature.

It then had the temerity to ask me to subscribe before I'd found the main menu. The 'X' to close the box (1 in our screenshot above) only appears after three seconds, in a blatant attempt to trick you into clicking Continue 2. I eventually found dozens of filters and used 'Pixar Art' on a photo of myself at the famous Whalebone Arch in Whitby, North Yorkshire. Unfortunately, it interpreted Pixar's style as a blurred, oversaturated abomination (pictured above). If this is genius, then I'm Moby Dick's uncle.



Keumars had a whale of a time in Whitby, not that you'd know it from this AI makeover

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Judson Althoff, Microsoft

www.snipca.com/54707

"The role of agentic AI has grown rapidly over the past several months as organizational leaders seek ways to accelerate AI Transformation. We firmly believe that Agents + Copilot + Human Ambition can deliver real AI differentiation for our customers. By putting the autonomous capabilities of an agent to work for their businesses, our customers are unlocking AI opportunity to realize greater value."

WHAT THEY MEAN

Pretentious Jargon + AI Hype + Human Gullibility means we can unlock more value from our customers.

KEUMARS' VILLAINS OF THE FORTNIGHT

Headphone dodgers

I wouldn't mind sitting next to this man on my morning commute. He seems quite cheerful, but more importantly his expensive-looking headphones would probably keep his playlist away from my ears. He's not the kind of headphone dodger increasingly ruining journeys on public transport by playing loud music on their phones.

The Liberal Democrats recently called for these selfish buffoons to be fined up to £1,000. Conservative and Labour MPs have previously suggested something similar. The Government said existing rules already outlaw anti-social behaviour, but they don't specifically target playing music and video loudly.

I'm not sure a fine is a big enough deterrent. Let's hit them where it hurts: instant destruction of their phone. Then we can go about our business in peace and quiet.

DESKTOP PC | **£999** from PCSpecialist www.snipca.com/54661

PCSpecialist Hydra R60S

Box clever

One way to get better value for money from a new desktop PC is to ignore the lure of the very latest processors and graphics cards, and opt for older components that are tried and tested. That's what PCSpecialist has done with the Hydra R60S. It's built around AMD's six-core Ryzen 5 7500F processor, which is nearly two years old, but which continues to hold up well in benchmark tests. Likewise, the graphics card here is an Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060. It may be less powerful than the recently launched RTX 50 series, but it's more than good enough for games and creative tasks, such as video editing. Just a few months ago it was up there with the best.

> "Older components keep the price down while maintaining good performance levels"

The key benefit, of course, is that this slightly older kit makes the whole thing cheaper, which means PCSpecialist can offer the Hydra for less than £1,000. Compared with the CyberPowerPC Infinity Z890 Air (£1,799 from www.snipca.com/54503, reviewed in Issue 709), which has a newer processor and graphics, it's a significant saving.

In benchmarks that push these components to their limits, you can see the difference. In intensive tasks the Hydra achieved just over half the speed of the Infinity. In everyday jobs the gap is much closer, however, and if you don't tend to use resource-hungry programs, you're unlikely to notice much of a difference.

We saw similar performance gaps when playing games with the detail settings turned all the way up. The Hydra still performs well as a gaming PC at 1080p resolution, but started to drop frames when we pushed the resolution further. The Infinity, meanwhile, can go up to next-level 1440p resolution and maintain a consistent average frame rate.

The 16GB of RAM and 1TB SSD are acceptable, but represent another compromise next to the Infinity's 32BG/2TB specification. You can easily upgrade these at a later date if required – the side panel comes off easily by removing a few thumb screws (so no screwdrivers required), and all the sockets you need for any replacement kit are easily accessible.

The chassis – the PCS Prism II – is one of PCSpecialist's many custom cases. It's a basic model, but there are no rough edges and it's easy enough on the eye. What we most liked is its size – it's a trim 210mm wide and 363mm deep, meaning it won't eat up too much floor or desk space.

We didn't hear a single whine from the fans during tests. This isn't to say this is a silent PC – there's always a faint whirr, and it steps up a notch or two when pushed – but we could happily live with this unit on our desk. Much of the credit for this should go to its chunky air cooler.

SPECIFICATIONS
Six-core AMD Ryzen 5 7500F processor • 16GB RAM • 8GB Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060 graphics card • 1TB SSD • Windows 11 Home • 447x210x363mm (HxWxD) • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/54661

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

There's a decent range of ports around the back. It's good to see a USB-C port with a peak speed of 10Gbps (ie, USB 3.2 Gen 2). There's plenty of USB-A ports, with three supporting USB 3.2 Gen 2, two USB 3.2 Gen 1 (5Gbps) and two slower USB 2.0 (480Mbps). You also get a 2.5Gb Ethernet port and plenty of audio outputs, including S/PDIF.

The PC comes with a generous three-year warranty, with the first year including labour, while courier costs are covered for the first six months.

VERDICT A decent PC for under £1,000, though you don't get the very latest processor or graphics card

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
CyberPower Infinity Z890 Air £1,799 Cutting-edge components make this even faster, though more expensive

LAPTOP | **£1,499** from Currys www.snipca.com/54680

MSI Prestige 13 AI+ Evo A2VM

Sweetness and light

The first thing that caught our attention with this laptop was how light it is. MSI quotes it as 990g, but it came up at 967g on our scales. Either way, you'll barely notice it if you need to carry it around in a rucksack. MSI achieves this with a magnesium-aluminium chassis that's as durable as it is light. It should stay looking smart well beyond the life of the one-year warranty.

Inside there's an Intel Core Ultra 9 288V processor, which is more powerful than the Core Ultra 7 in our current favourite laptop – Asus Vivobook 16 Flip (£1,300 from www.snipca.com/54366, reviewed in Issue 708) – and, unsurprisingly, it performed better in our benchmark tests.

> "Faster than previous favourite laptops thanks to a more powerful processor"

And while the Prestige hasn't been designed as a gaming PC, it can just about cope with the likes of Microsoft Flight Simulator if you keep the resolution to 1080p and graphical detail settings relatively low. Start nudging either upwards and you'll notice the frame rate dropping.

The OLED screen looks fantastic with games and movies, offering perfect contrast and dazzling whites. It happily reproduces all the colours in the DCI-P3 standard, and we measured brightness levels up to an impressive 394cd/m². The downside is that it's much smaller than the screen on the Vivobook at 13.3in across the diagonal, compared to 16in on the Asus laptop.

OLED screens tend to take a toll on battery life, but in our light-usage test – which simulates office work – it lasted 17 hours 22 minutes with the brightness at 150cd/m². That's over three hours longer than the Vivobook. When we turned the brightness to its maximum and worked on it for an hour the battery gauge dropped by just eight per cent.

Two USB-C ports sit on the left-hand edge, both supporting Thunderbolt 4 and USB 4.0, alongside an HDMI socket and audio jack. The right-hand side offers a still useful USB 3.2 Gen 1 port (5Gbps) plus a microSD card slot. For wireless connections there's Wi-Fi 7 and Bluetooth 5.4 built in.

There are a couple of sticking points. The speakers are loud and detailed but start to sound harsh at higher volumes. And while the keyboard has punchy backlighting (which automatically appears as your fingers come close) and the keys are quiet, the half-height cursor keys are hard to pick out and use.

However, it's the smaller screen and the higher price that stop this laptop toppling the Asus Vivobook 16 Flip as our favourite.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core Ultra 9 288V processor • 32GB RAM • Intel Arc 140V graphics • 13.3in 2880x1800-pixel 60Hz OLED screen • 1TB SSD • 2x USB-C 4.0 ports • 1x USB 3.2 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 16.9x299x210mm (HxWxD) • 967g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54680

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Has a stunning screen, but it's smaller than our favourite (below) yet costs £200 more

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip £1,300
Less powerful, but the luxurious 16in OLED screen makes the Vivobook better value for money

PRINTER | **£90** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54705

HP LaserJet M209dw

Small print

This affordable and compact mono laser printer is just 205mm tall with a small footprint of 355x427mm (WxD). And because its protruding paper tray can be removed when not in use you can reduce the depth to 280mm.

There's no scanner, no touchscreen display (a simple print-only device like this doesn't really need one) and just the one paper input, so it looks clean and functional. The buttons on the top are easy to access, while a vivid LED strip on the front panel lets you know when the printer is on and connected.

> "Prints crisp black text on plain paper at a top speed of 30 pages per minute"

The paper-input tray feels flimsy and comes unclipped a little too easily for our liking, but its forward-facing flap makes it easy to load the maximum 150 sheets (the output tray holds 100 sheets) and switch paper types – it accepts anything from 4x6in photo paper to A4 plain paper.

To connect it you can use Wi-Fi, Ethernet or a USB cable. It can be installed on a Windows PC using its own software, and can print from any mobile device with an HP Smart app. The latter adds the ability to directly print files from online-storage services such as OneDrive and Google Drive, and even lets you send, receive and print faxes. The 700-page starter cartridge is already installed, so you simply need to load some paper, work through the setup procedure and you're up and running.

The LaserJet produced clear and consistent output throughout our testing, with no misprints or paper jams. It performed particularly well with black text on plain paper, which was crisp and legible down to the smallest font size. Printing in draft mode produced only slightly paler reproductions, which should be fine in most circumstances if you're looking to cut costs or print times.

It isn't the fastest laser printer we've come across, particularly given it takes around 30 seconds to warm up when it's been idle for a while, but it can still churn out 30 pages per minute at full speed. That's not lightning-quick, but shouldn't be a problem, unless you're producing lengthy documents on a tight deadline.

You probably shouldn't be considering a mono device if you intend to print graphics and photos, and unsurprisingly the LaserJet didn't shine when we put this to the test. Colour photos and charts came out too dark when converted to mono to be of much use.

The printer includes the option of using high-yield toner cartridges that are quoted to produce 2,400 pages. These cost £83 direct from HP, which works out at 3.5p per page. This is reasonable value for money considering the printer itself is fairly cheap. There's no doubt that Inkjet tank printers have cheaper running costs, but they tend to be more expensive to buy. And this laser is still cheaper to run than most cartridge-based inkjets.

HP claims the LaserJet can handle up to 2,000 pages a month without the risk of excessive wear and tear, which will be plenty for most homes. But if you do intend to use it only occasionally, a laser printer like this is probably a good choice. Inkjets can suffer from blocked nozzles if they aren't used regularly.

The reasonable price tag means some handy features like a touchscreen and second input tray have been omitted, but this does a great job of basic mono printing if that's all you need.

SPECIFICATIONS

A4 laser printer • One toner cartridge (black) • 150-sheet paper capacity • 600x600dpi print quality • USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi connections • 280x355x427mm • 5.6kg • One-year warranty

www.snipca.com/54705

VERDICT A reasonably priced mono laser printer that's ideal for smaller home offices and occasional use

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Canon i-Sensys LBP243dw £185 Twice the price, but comes with a second paper tray and a handy display

SMARTPHONE | **£499** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54747

Google Pixel 9a

Straight As

The Pixel 9a is the most affordable model in Google's current line-up of smartphones. Its release follows the same pattern we've seen from Google over the past few generations, with the expensive flagship phones (in this case the Pixel 9 and 9 Pro series) launching first, then the affordable 'a' version appearing a few months later.

> "The best Android phone we've seen in its price range"

The 9a looks a little different to the other Pixel 9 phones, losing the wide camera bar across the back and replacing it with a protruding section in the top-left corner. This makes it look more like a generic smartphone than a Pixel, and with its flat sides and rounded corners, it's reminiscent of Apple's iPhone 16e (£599 from www.snipca.com/54407, reviewed in Issue 708).

One thing the 9a shares with its older, pricier siblings is its processor, the Tensor G4. As a result, it feels like a premium Android phone, while in our benchmark tests it outperformed every other Android model we've tested at this price. The iPhone 16 is even faster, if you're prepared to pay £100 more and use iOS rather than Android. However, in everyday use the two phones felt similarly powerful, because most tasks don't push a phone like this to its limits. Battery performance is good, too, lasting 13 hours 8 minutes in our tests – better than the iPhone 16e.

The Pixel's 6.3in pOLED screen is gorgeous, with a 120Hz refresh rate that makes animations fluid in a way the iPhone 16e's 60Hz panel can't match. Even more impressive is its stunning peak brightness of 2,076cd/m² – no other phone at this price comes close. Colour coverage is terrific, too, with our tests showing it can reproduce 94 per cent of the colours in the DCI-P3 standard.

The camera is excellent, with the main lens capturing bright, clean images, while the ultrawide second lens offers a more cinematic view to capture more of the scene. The pictures we took looked natural, with the sensor picking up plenty of detail in the shadows when taking photos in low light. The 9a has all the AI image tools the more expensive Pixels offer, including Add Me (which lets you combine shots to include the photographer in a photo), Magic Editor and Best Take.

Google showcases its excellent Android operating system here with none of the additional interfaces or unwanted apps that can clutter other implementations. However, competition is tight around this price, and at its new price of £424, we think the Samsung Galaxy A56 (www.snipca.com/54585) offers better value for money – just! It remains our favourite Android phone (see page 30).

SPECIFICATIONS
Eight-core Tensor G4 processor • 8GB RAM • 128GB or 256GB storage • 6.3in 2424x1080-pixel pOLED screen • 48-megapixel rear camera • 13-megapixel ultrawide camera • 13-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • Android 15 • 155x73x8.9mm (HxWxD) • 186g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54747

VERDICT A superb Android phone with better features and performance than any similarly priced rivals

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Samsung Galaxy A56 £424 A stunning screen and 29-hour battery life – at this price it's an outstanding bargain

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

PC cases

What does it do?

A desktop PC's case is the chassis to which all your hardware attaches, while also protecting it and keeping everything cool. PC cases vary in shape and size, and which you choose will determine the type of components you can install, especially the motherboard, graphics card and storage. Cases may also have additional ports that you can access from the front or top of the PC.

How does it work?

If you buy a PC from a retailer or large manufacturer, you won't get to choose the case. If you're building your own computer, you can select any case you like, but make sure it's compatible with your components. When buying from a PC builder such as PCSpecialist (www.pcspecialist.co.uk), CyberPower PC (www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk) and Wired2Fire (www.wired2fire.co.uk), you usually have a choice of cases.

What are the specs?

The key spec to check is that a case is compatible with your motherboard. There are a few standard motherboard sizes, so check whether yours is ATX, Micro-ATX or Mini-ITX, and ensure your case accepts it. The largest expansion card you're likely to install is the graphics card, so take its size into account, too. After that, consider whether it has additional ports and buttons that are easy to access, such as those on the Corsair 3000D RGB Airflow (£89.99 from www.snipca.com/54748, pictured), and choose a design you like.

Can I change it later?

You could certainly take all your PC's components out of one case and put them into another, but you really need to know what you're doing.

WEBCAM | **£79** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54725

Obsbot Meet SE

Clear winner

The Logitech C925e has been our favourite webcam since Issue 608 (back in 2021), but we've finally found a model that knocks it off its perch. The Meet SE from Chinese manufacturer Obsbot has an unassuming design – essentially a small box with a lens on the front – but it beats the picture quality of the C925e and offers more features for only a few pounds extra.

> "Accurate and vibrant colours even in poor lighting"

Setup is incredibly straightforward – simply connect it to your PC with the supplied USB-C cable and you're ready to go. It comes with a convenient magnetic mount, which can be clipped on to the top edge of your monitor. It also comes with a standard tripod fitting.

The C925e can be angled in landscape or portrait mode (the latter can come in handy if you're talking to someone who's using a smartphone). The accompanying software is easy to use and lets you adjust exposure, contrast and sharpness if you need to fine-tune what you see.

That said, the most striking feature out of the box is the exceptional image quality. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with a granular level of detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture. Captured footage looks smooth, achieving up to 150 frames per second (fps) at 720p resolution and 100fps at 1080p.

The C925e has an excellent auto-focus feature that tracks your position in front of the camera, so you remain the centre of attention and crystal clear at all times. It has handy tools that let you digitally zoom in should you want to show something in more detail.

The one thing we weren't fond of is gesture control, which allows hands-free operation of the webcam. The camera watches your hand movements and responds to any it recognises as a gesture command, which resulted in it doing things we didn't intend (for example, zooming in/out, start/stop recording). It's easy enough to switch off if you find this irritating.

The built-in microphones do the job for casual family chats, but we'd recommend a headset or external microphone if sound quality is important. In testing it was good enough in a quiet room, but in a busy office it picked up a little too much background noise for our liking.

SPECIFICATIONS

1/2.8in CMOS sensor • Up to 1080p resolution • Up to 150fps • 78-degree field of view • 36x45x22mm (HxWxD) without mount • 33g without mount • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/51094

VERDICT A compact webcam that's easy to use and provides exceptional video quality for both work meetings and virtual get-togethers with family and friends

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Logitech C925e Business Webcam £60 This is a cheaper option but picture quality is inferior

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best graphics tablet for drawing?

Q One of my grandsons is mad about drawing and 3D printing. I have some 3D printers that we've been experimenting with in the hope that this opens up opportunities for him in the future. With that in mind, I'd like to buy him a graphics tablet for his drawing, but which one should I choose?

Robert Lindsay

A As you'll probably be aware, graphics tablets vary greatly in price. If you're happy to start off with a basic device to see how your grandson takes to drawing on a screen, we'd recommend the One by Wacom (£36 from www.snipca.com/54729). This is a great entry-level device that connects to a PC, though colour accuracy and brightness levels are limited.

If he's serious about drawing and your budget is bigger, the XPPen Artist Pro 14 (£400 from www.snipca.com/54730, pictured) has a built-in screen, so he can see what he's drawing as he creates his pictures.

Another option is an iPad (£329 from www.snipca.com/54731) and Apple Pencil (£79 from www.snipca.com/54732) using the Procreate app (£13 from www.snipca.com/54733). One benefit of this option is that he'll be able to use the iPad for other things, such as school work.

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EARBUDS | **£100** from Currys www.snipca.com/54715

Sony WF-C710N

Good to hear

These earbuds are a follow-up to Sony's excellent WF-C700N (£68 from www.snipca.com/48438, reviewed in Issue 673) and offer some welcome hardware improvements.

The highlight is the noise-cancelling feature, where Sony has truly upped its game. While testing on a busy commuter train we found it was the most effective we've ever experienced at this price – and certainly better than the already excellent C700N buds.

Sound quality is also impressive without noise cancelling switched on. However, it's only marginally better than the C700N buds, so if you already own these there's no point upgrading if you don't use noise cancelling much.

Battery life has been doubled to 40 hours (with noise cancelling off – 12 hours from the buds, 28 from the case) and 30 hours with cancelling on. This is due to its larger batteries – both the buds and case are larger to accommodate these. The C710N buds are also better at making and taking calls, thanks to an additional built-in microphone that helps to capture your voice more accurately.

One improvement we really like is wearer detection, meaning the buds now stop playing if you remove one or both and continue from where you left off when you pop them back in.

There are on-ear touch controls, including volume adjustment, playback, access to noise cancelling profiles, and the ability to summon voice assistants such as Siri on such as Siri if connected to an iPhone or Google Assistant on an Android phone. an iPhone or Google Assistant on an Android phone.

SPECIFICATIONS

5mm drivers • 40 or 30-hour battery life (with case) • Active noise cancellation • Bluetooth 5.3 • IPX4 ingress protection • 5.2g per bud • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54715

VERDICT Sony has improved its already excellent earbuds, with high-quality noise cancellation at an affordable price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sony WF-C700N £68 Sony's previous buds are still available for less. They lack some features but remain excellent value for money

CHARGER | **£35** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54717

Ugreen Uno 65W

Face value

Plugs that charge your devices aren't the most exciting gadgets, so Chinese firm Ugreen has given its Uno 65W charger a personality. It's added an animated face that makes it look like a robot. It's a gimmick that's more likely to appeal to kids than the average *Computeractive* reader, but behind the twee facade is a remarkably capable charger.

It can charge up to three devices simultaneously, with two USB-C and one USB-A ports. To get the full 65 Watts of power to a device it will need to be connected to the primary USB-C port and have no other devices attached. Start charging more devices and you'll get 45W from the main USB-C port, then anywhere between 20W and 7.5W from the other two, depending on how many ports are in use.

To test it we plugged a Samsung Galaxy S24 FE phone into the main USB-C slot and charged two portable Bluetooth speakers via the other slots. The battery in the S24 went from empty to full in just under 80 minutes, which is very quick.

The charger itself is only the top half of the device. Separate the top from the base and you'll find a three-pronged plug that can then be slotted into any UK plug socket. The expression on the robot's face is more than just decoration – it indicates which mode the charger is in: closed eyes on standby, smiling when fast charging and a blank expression when trickle charging or achieving a full charge.

SPECIFICATIONS

65W max power output • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB-A port • 55x64x68mm (HxWxD) • 181g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54717

VERDICT Despite its twee appearance, this 65W charger is idealfor boosting the batteries of multiple mobile devices simultaneously

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Anker Prime Charger £80 More expensive, but can charge up to six devices from a single socket and provide up to 200W of power

SMARTWATCH | **£319** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/54762

OnePlus Watch 3

Ticks every box

The OnePlus Watch 3 builds on the success of its award-winning predecessor, the Watch 2 (£299 from www.snipca.com/49769, reviewed Issue 681), with a number of improvements. Most of these are incremental rather than revolutionary, but together they make for an even more useful and satisfying device.

> "Battery life is 120 hours, much longer than its predecessor and rival watches"

One of the Watch 2's main strengths was its 100-hour battery life. The Watch 3 takes this even further, lasting 120 hours, or almost an extra day. That's significantly longer than watches from rivals such as Apple and Samsung can go between charges.

The Watch 3 is slightly thinner than its predecessor but otherwise similar in size. This means it's still quite hefty and best suited to those with larger wrists.

On the positive side, it has room for a large circular screen, with a radius of 1.5in. It's also bright at 2,000cd/m², matching the brightness of Apple's Watch Ultra 2 (from £799 at www.snipca.com/54767). This combination of size and brightness makes messages and notifications easy to read.

Switching between functions is also easy, thanks to a new rotating controller on the outside edge of the watch face. Rotating it left and right lets you scroll through menus, making navigation much simpler.

The Watch 3 offers the same basic functions to track your exercise, whether it's simply counting steps or measuring your running distance. It also tracks your heart rate and can provide information on the quality of your sleep if you wear the watch in bed. We found it did a good job of this, and seemed reasonably accurate when we compared its results with data from other smart devices we wore at the same time.

It's based on the Android operating system, giving you access to the Play Store, which is well supported by watch app developers. Many of the apps you already use on your phone are likely to offer watch-based add-ons, so you can easily check your messages, control music services and get directions, all from your wrist.

The Watch 3's improvements are very welcome and make this an excellent choice, although they're perhaps not significant enough to persuade any Watch 2 owners to upgrade just yet.

SPECIFICATIONS
1.5in LTPO display • 5ATM water resistance • Bluetooth 5.2 • Up to 120 hours battery life • 47.6x46.6x11mm (HxDxW) • 81g with strap • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54762

VERDICT This update of an already excellent Android smartwatch is big, bold, bright and useful, but best suited to larger wrists

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE OnePlus Watch 2 £299 Still available and slightly more affordable, but it's worth paying a few extra pounds for the new features on the Watch 3

DO I REALLY NEED...

A monitor with an e-ink screen?

What is it?

Boox, a Chinese manufacturer of ebook readers, has launched a 25.3in colour version of its Mira Pro monitor (www.snipca.com/54771, pictured). It uses an e-ink screen instead of an IPS or OLED panel.

What does it do?

Unlike a traditional monitor, which refreshes its screen many times a second, the Mira Pro updates only when the image changes. This makes it more comfortable to view when working on office documents and other tasks that don't require constant screen updates.

What's the catch?

The colours aren't as bright or accurate as on a regular monitor, and it's slower to respond. Boox doesn't quote a refresh rate, but we doubt it's ideal for watching videos, for example. It's also expensive at $1899.99 (around £1,421).

So can I do without it?

Yes. E-ink monitors may fall in price over the next few years, but it'll be a long time before they're good enough to replace IPS or OLED screens.

NEXT ISSUE

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Acer Aspire 3 15 Costing less than £500, this Windows 11 laptop looks like an absolute steal

Apple iPad 11 Is the latest version of Apple's iPad the right tablet for you?

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip
£1,300 from www.snipca.com/54366
Tested Issue 708

Versatile device that can be used like a laptop or flipped over like a tablet. It's faster than the Dell Inspiron (below) with office software and web browsing, has a stunning screen, and lasts nearly 14 hours. Worth the money.

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus Comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Great value. £599 from www.snipca.com/54634

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.9in
£329 from www.snipca.com/53977
Tested Issue 646

The price of the 10th-generation iPad, released in 2022, has fallen far enough that it's the best-value model. The link above takes you to Apple, but also check John Lewis where it's been as low as £309.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

Honor MagicPad2
£399 from www.snipca.com/53150
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £799 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Samsung Galaxy A56
£424 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £279 from www.snipca.com/53388.

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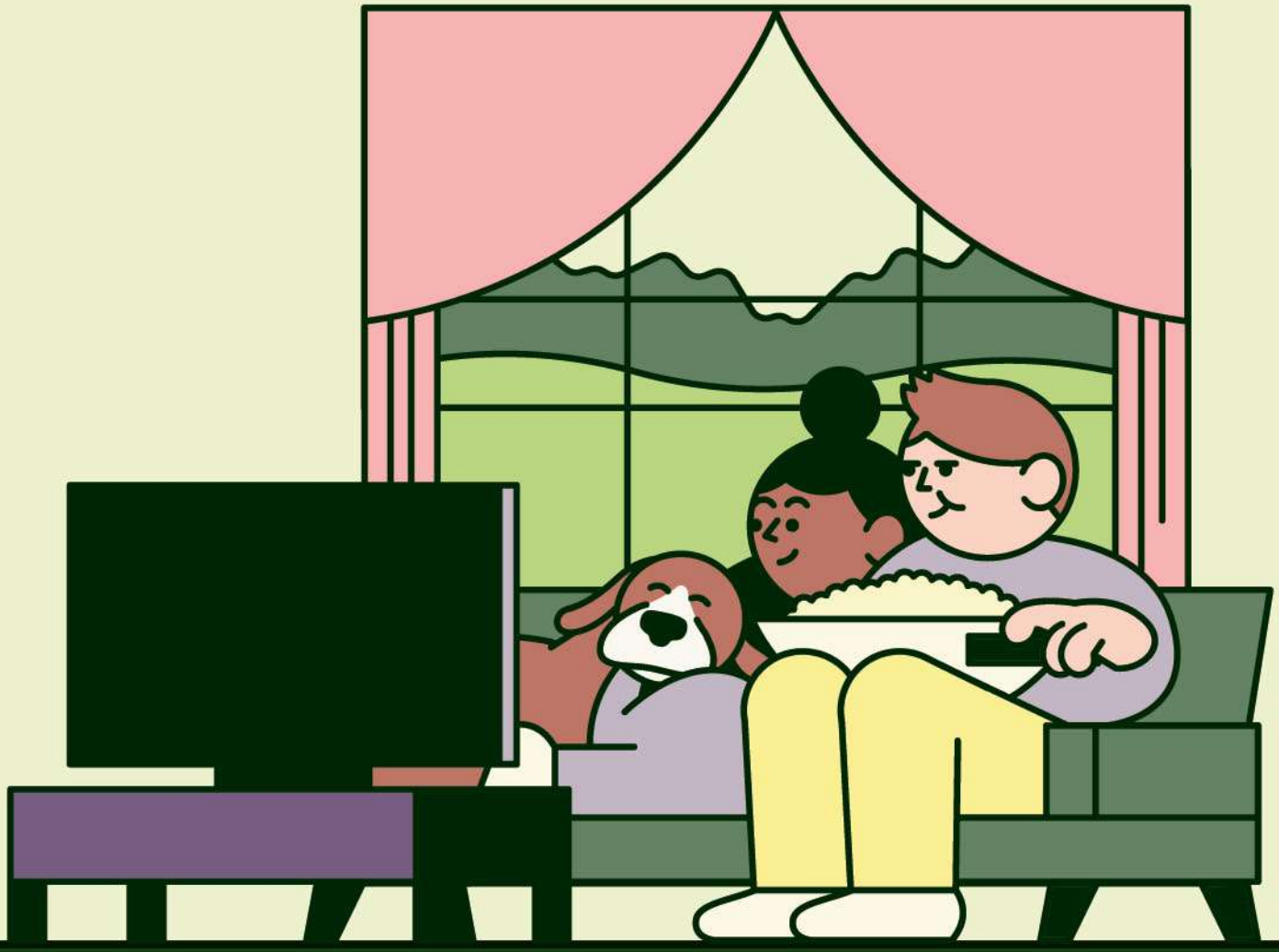

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £899 from www.snipca.com/51157

EBOOK READER

Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £190 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£65 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£81 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £81; 2TB costs £141.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £65 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 3...
QDOS SnapStand Qi2 3-in-1 chargers

The SnapStand Qi2 from QDOS is a sleek, foldable 3-in-1 wireless charger built to work with Qi2 technology – making it future-proof. Its 360-degree rotating base ensures flexible viewing angles, while delivering up to 15W fast wireless charging for Qi2 smartphones and MagSafe-enabled iPhones.

Perfect for on-the-go use, the SnapStand Qi2 is compact, durable and crafted from 62-per-cent recycled zinc alloy that combines eco-friendliness with premium quality.

With added support for 2.5W watch charging and 5W earphone charging, it's the ultimate power-up solution. Rigorously tested for safety and reliability, the SnapStand Qi2 ensures seamless performance, making it an essential accessory for modern lifestyles. It comes in space-grey and with a USB-C cable.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/54647 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 3 June. Good luck!

You can buy the **SnapStand Qi2** for £99.99 from www.snipca.com/54646. For more details on QDOs products, including adapters, screen protectors and devices for Apple Watches, visit www.qdossound.com.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£182 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £140 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£200 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £419 from www.snipca.com/52110

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £216 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Improve your photo editing using layer masks

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: GIMP **Time required:** One hour

The last time you painted a room, how did you stop your wall colour getting on the ceiling? Or the gloss of your door frames straying into the surrounding emulsion? You probably used tape to mask off those areas. Layer masks in image editors like GIMP, Photoshop and Affinity Photo work in much the same way, letting you control which areas are affected by a new layer of pixels. Here, we'll explain how to use layers in the powerful free image editor GIMP (www.gimp.org). You can then easily transfer what you've learned to any other image editors you may use.

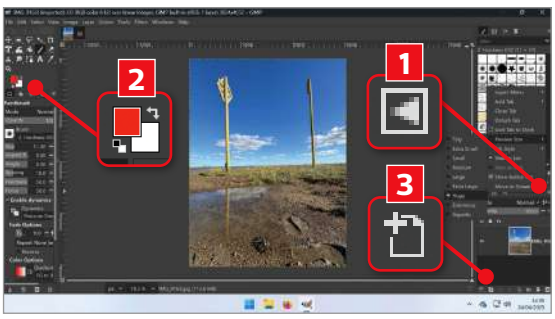
1 Make thumbnail image easier to see

Open GIMP then press Ctrl+O, select a photo and click Open. When the picture opens in the main window, you'll see a matching thumbnail in the sidebar's Layers panel. Start by making this larger so you can more easily see what's happening when you apply a mask. To do this, click the configure button (1 in our screenshot below), then hover over Preview Size and click Huge on the menu that appears.

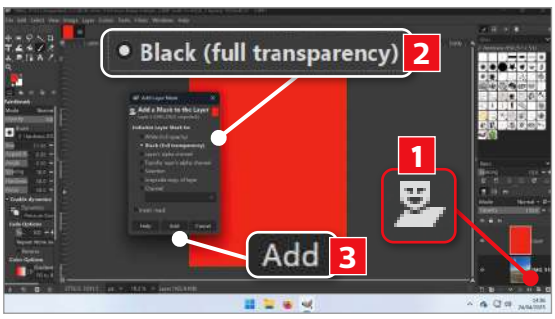
Click the uppermost of the two coloured squares 2 and change it to a bright colour (we're using red) in the box that opens. Now add a new layer by clicking the Create button 3. Make sure 'Fill with' is set to 'Foreground colour' then click OK. Your image will disappear, and you'll now have two layers in the sidebar: the new red layer on top, and your original image below.

Click the Mask icon (1 in our screenshot below right) and when the menu appears, select 'Black (full transparency)' 2 and click Add 3. Your red layer will disappear entirely in the main image window but, if you look in the layers panel, it's still there, alongside a new black square. So, what happened?

You've just applied a mask to the red layer – and, because the mask is black, it's blocking out that layer entirely. If the mask had been white, the red layer would still have been visible. Think of it as a lights-off (black), lights-on (white) process: with the lights off, you can't see the layer, but with the lights on, you can. Bear in mind that a mask only affects the layer to which it is directly applied, which is why the original image hasn't also disappeared – because it has no mask.



Increase the thumbnail size so that your mask is easier to see



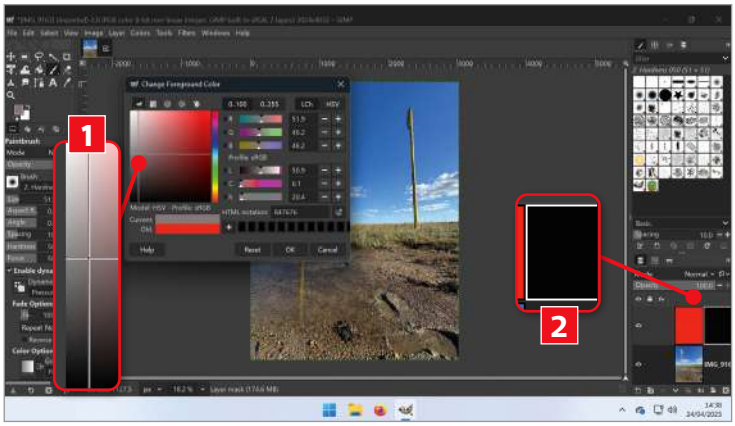
Applying a black mask will make the layer disappear

2 Make colours show through

So far, we have an entirely binary solution: lights entirely on or entirely off. But what if we had a dimmer switch? Click the foreground colour square again, to open a new window, click and hold in the graduated colour block, and drag the crosshairs to the left and roughly half way down – to select a middling grey tone (1 in our screenshot right). Click OK.

Press Shift+B to switch to the bucket tool. Now take a quick look at the layers sidebar again and make sure the black square (your layer mask) has a white border 2. This indicates it's the layer you're about to edit. If the white border surrounds anything else, like the red layer or the original photo, click the black layer mask to reselect it.

Now, back in the bucket tool, click the main picture. When you do this, two things will happen: the black layer mask will turn grey in the sidebar, to match the colour you've selected in the colour square, and the red of the associated layer will start to show through, affecting the tone of your image. The darker the colour you selected in the colour chip (the closer to black, or lights off the mask was), the less of the red will show. The lighter the colour (the closer to white, or lights on), the more of the red layer will be visible.



We're using the crosshairs to select a grey tone in the colour field

3 Hide and reveal images

Let's do something useful with our layer mask. Visit the free stock photography website Unsplash and download the photos at www.snipca.com/54641 and www.snipca.com/54642 (click the green 'Download free' button at the top right of each page). Now return to GIMP, press Ctrl+O and select both images from your Downloads folder (their names begin 'omar–' and 'luigi–'), then click Open. They will open in separate tabs in GIMP, and you can switch between them by clicking the thumbnails at the top of the screen. As you'll see, the beach scene is attractive, but the sky is a bit washed out. We'll use a layer mask to remedy this situation.

Switch to the picture of the field and press Ctrl+A to select all of it, then Ctrl+C to copy it. Now click the beach thumbnail at the top of the screen and press Ctrl+V to paste the countryside on top of it.

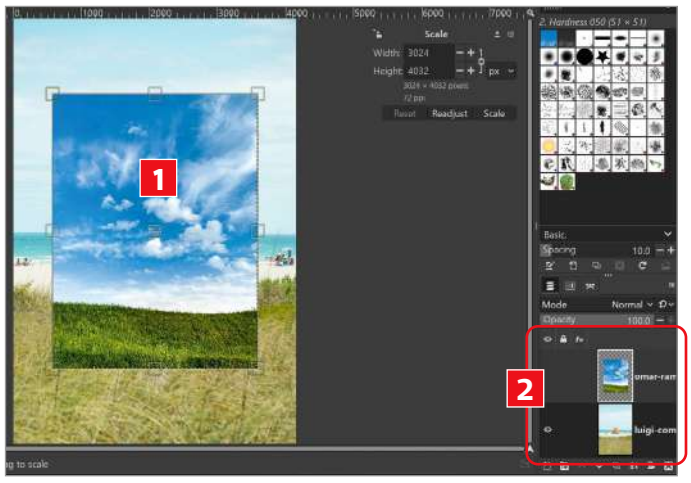
The countryside picture is smaller than the beach scene (1 in our screenshot below left), so press Shift+S on your keyboard to select the scale tool, then drag the handles on the corners of the countryside image so it entirely covers the beach scene, then press Enter. The beach view has disappeared but, as you can see from the layers panel, it's still there beneath the countryside shot 2.

Let's use a layer mask to hide the bottom of the countryside view. Click the Add Mask button, and this time select 'White (full opacity)', then click Add. White is our 'lights on' scenario, where the countryside scene remains fully lit, and therefore fully visible. We'll use a paintbrush and some black pixels to turn off the lights in just the lower portion of the frame to reveal the beach, but keep the sky hidden.

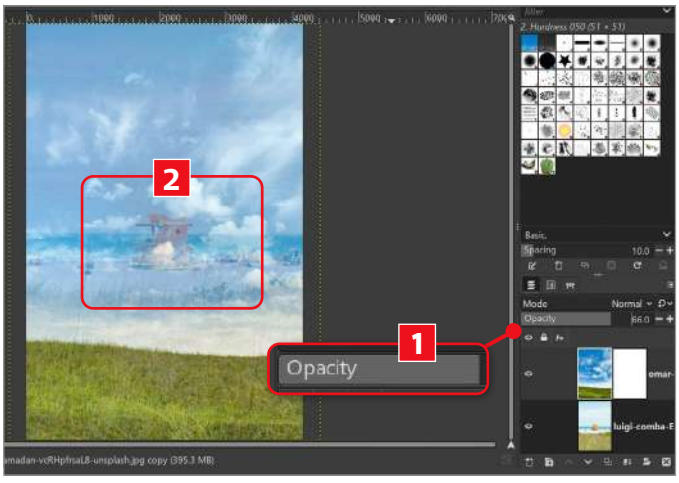
Of course, as things stand, we don't know how much of the countryside view we should paint out as we can't see the beach scene beneath it, so click the countryside thumbnail in the layers panel to give it a white border (indicating that it's selected), then drag the Opacity slider (1 in our screenshot below) to the left until it's roughly three quarters of the way across the width of the panel. The beach will start to show through 2.

Now click the white layer mask in the layers panel, to the right of the countryside scene thumbnail, then press P to switch to the Paintbrush tool. Click the uppermost colour square and select an area of pure black in the graduated colour block within the window that opens. Click OK.

Next, using your mouse, paint over the



The countryside photo is smaller than the beach scene, so we'll scale it to cover the beach entirely



By reducing the opacity of the upper layer, the beach shot shows through

Credit Omar Ramadan and Luigi Comba

countryside view where the beach, sea and lifeguard station are showing through from the layer below. Use a fairly large brush size at this point so you can block the areas you don't need more quickly. Don't worry if you're not as precise as you'd like to be when you reach the horizon and the roof of the lifeguard station – we'll fix that in a moment.

When you've got rid of the lower part of the countryside view to leave only the blue sky from that image overlaying the washed-out sky of the original, reduce the brush size by dragging the slider to the left, then press X to reverse the order of the colour squares. Previously, the uppermost square was black and now it will be white. So, where you were previously painting with black to block out the lower part of the countryside view, you'll now be painting with white to reinstate some of it using a finer brush.

Use this smaller brush and the white pixels to tidy up any messy edges along the horizon. As you paint, you'll see that the areas you're covering will reinstate parts of the countryside view that you'd previously masked out.

4 Add gradient effects as final touch

Do you find the result convincing? At first glance, it's not bad, but would the sky really be that blue all the way down to the horizon? Probably not. Let's consider what we've just done as a learning exercise, and undo it so we can try something else. Right-click the layer mask thumbnail (1 in our screenshot below), then click Delete Layer Masks in the menu that appears 2. The countryside view will be reinstated in its entirety.

Press G to select the gradient tool. This works a bit like the paint-bucket tool you used at the start, but rather than filling the area with a single colour, this lets you define two colours (start and end colours) and drag out a line across your image. It will fill the area you drag out with a gradient that fades from your start colour to your end colour across the length of the line. By choosing black and white as our start and end colours and dragging the line across a layer mask we can use it to produce a fade across the image layer to which it's attached.

Click the Add Mask button again, and this time select 'Black (full transparency)' then click Add. The countryside view will disappear to reveal the beach picture. Now, check the settings in the left-hand sidebar. Make sure Opacity is set to 100 (1 in our screenshot below right), Gradient to 'FG to BG (RGB)' 2 and Shape to Linear 3.

Now move your cursor to a point roughly between the top of your picture and the roof of the lifeguard station. Click and hold your mouse button, and drag a line down to the bottom of the lifeguard station 4. As you'll see in the left hand side of our composite picture below, the blue sky shows through strongly from the countryside layer, but fades out as it approaches the horizon.

Release the mouse button and press M to switch to the move tool. As you do, the layer-mask thumbnail in the layers sidebar will update, showing you that it now contains a white area at the top (lights on, so the countryside sky is entirely visible) and black at the bottom (lights off, so the countryside is entirely hidden), with a smoothly graduating level of intensity in the area between.

When working with layer masks, remember that any area of the mask that's white allows the layer to which it's attached to show. Any area that's black hides that part of the attached layer. The lightness or darkness of the tones in between, meanwhile, have a direct relationship to how much of the layer to which it's attached remains visible.

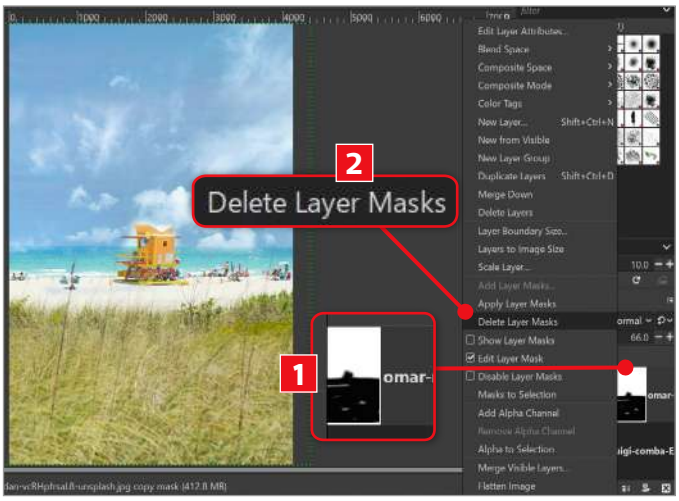
A composite showing the improved sky (left) with the original (right)

How I use layer masks

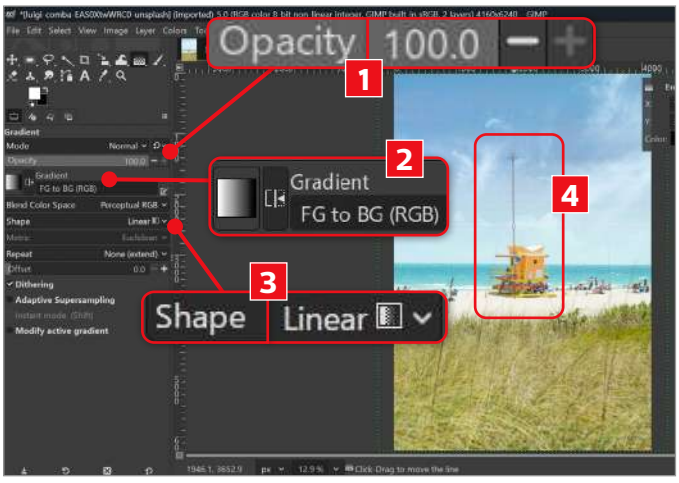
I edit a lot of photos and probably use masks on half of them. As well as using them to merge two or more pictures as I explain here, I use them to control the strength of effects and adjustments. That's not possible in GIMP, but we'll show you how you can do it in an alternative image editor in a future issue.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you use layer masks?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk



Quickly undo any changes you've made by deleting the mask



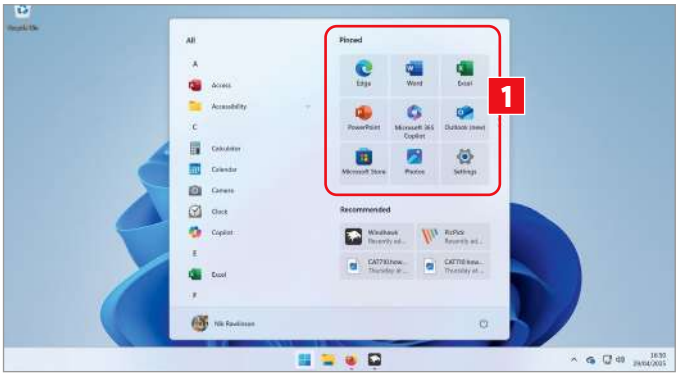
The vertical line on the image shows the start and end points of the gradient on our layer mask

Hack Windows so it works exactly as you want

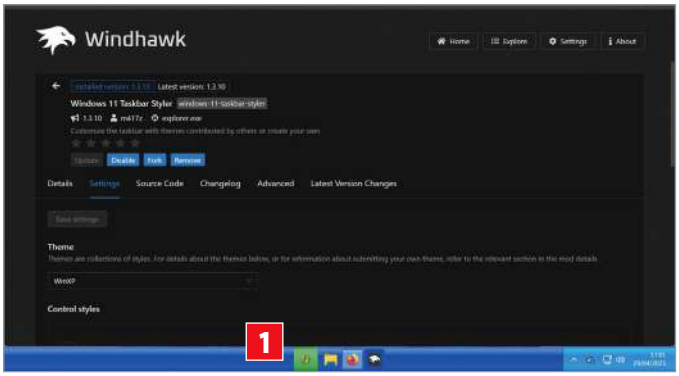
What you need: Windhawk **Time required:** 30 minutes

The superb free program Windhawk (www.windhawk.net) lets you set Windows to work the way you want by installing 'mods', which change how core features work. The first time you launch Windhawk, click 'Browse for Mods' on the home screen, then use the search box on the following page to find the mods we outline here. For any you want to use click the Details button below the mod's title, followed by Install. Each mod has a default way of working, but in many cases you can change this by clicking the Settings tab on the mod's home screen. These screens also contain an Install button that changes to a Remove button once the mod has been added (letting you uninstall it later).

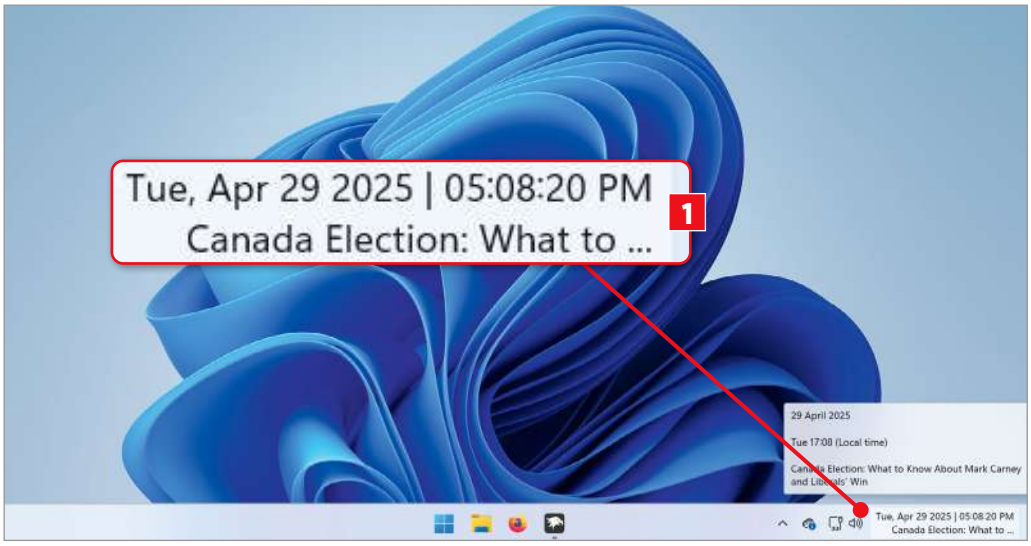
STEP 1 The Start menu is perhaps the section of Windows that has changed the most over the years. If you don't like the centred menu in Windows 11, **Start Menu Styler** lets you switch to something similar to Windows XP or the tiled Metro style 1 you'll remember from Windows 8 and 10. Select the menu you prefer from the Theme section of Start Menu Styler's Settings tab.

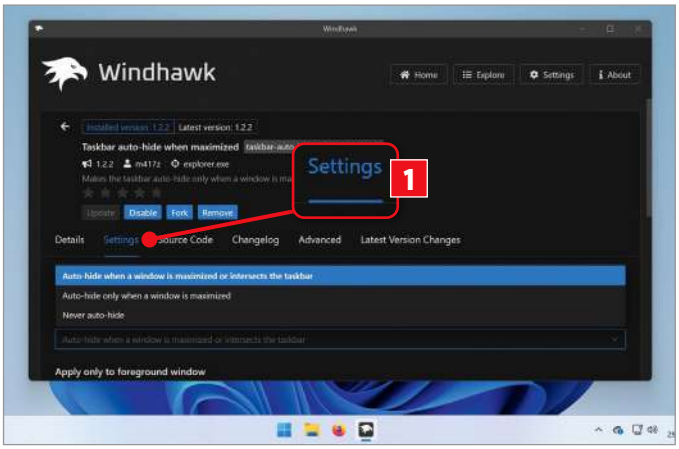


STEP 2 You might also want to adjust the taskbar, particularly if you miss the colourful 3D style of Windows XP 1, with **Windows 11 Taskbar Styler**. Alternatively, if you're looking for something more discreet, we'd recommend **DockLike**, which shrinks the full-width taskbar so it's just wide enough to accommodate your pinned programs and active software. Select this and the system tray on the far right of your taskbar will be neatly cordoned off into its own grey bubble.

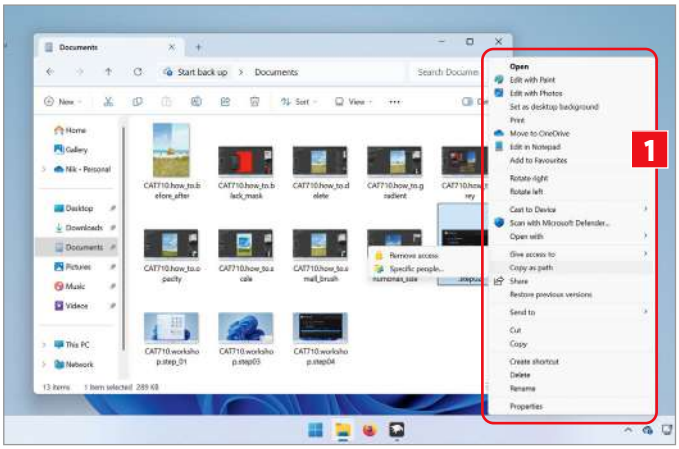


STEP 3 Staying with the system tray, you can make your clock more useful. Activate **Taskbar Clock Customization** and you can add useful chronological information, like the day of the week and live seconds, as well as the latest news headlines. We tested it on the day the result of the Canadian election was announced (29 April) and the first place we spotted the outcome was below our Windows clock 1.



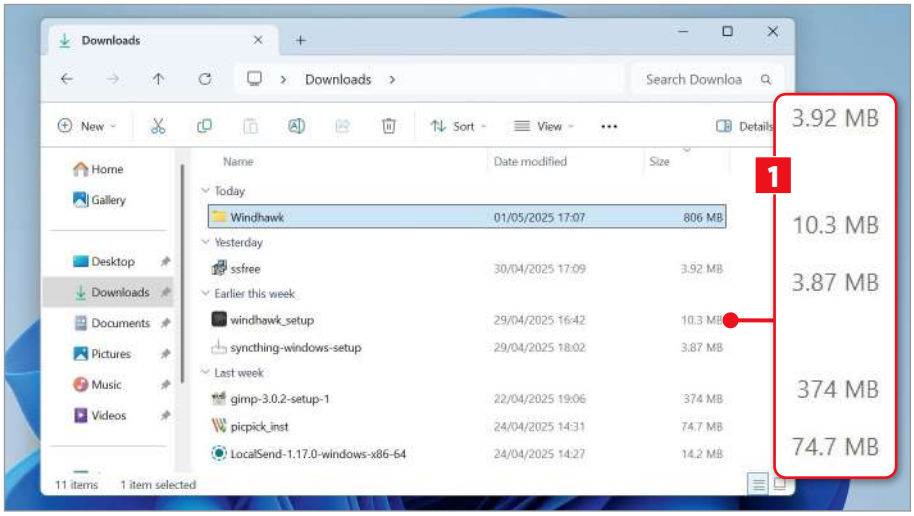


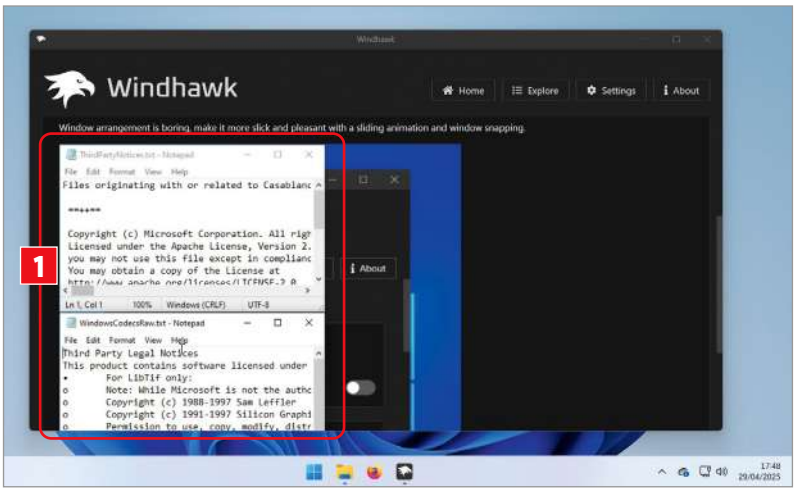
STEP 4 You can already set Windows to hide the taskbar in Settings, but Windhawk's **Taskbar Auto-Hide when Maximised** mod is a smart alternative. When you enable it, it keeps the taskbar in view until you maximise a window – at which point it slides smoothly off the screen. Better yet, if you move a non-maximised window to the bottom of the screen, the taskbar is hidden to make room (you can turn this off in the Settings menu 1).



STEP 5 Windows 11's context menu, which pops up when you right-click a file or folder, has moved some of its most useful options to a secondary list that only appears when you click 'Show more options'. The **Classic Context Menu** mod reinstates the single-layer menu from earlier Windows versions 1. When you've enabled it, you can still view the Windows 11 context menu by holding down the Ctrl key while right-clicking.

STEP 6 Enable the **Better File Sizes in Explorer Details** mod and Windows File Explorer will show the size of very large files in terms of MB or GB (megabytes and gigabytes) rather than KB (kilobytes), which makes a lot more sense. It will also show you how much space your folders are taking up on your drive 1. Currently, you can only find this information by right-clicking a folder and selecting Properties in the context menu, so this saves you an extra step.





STEP 7 If you like to arrange your windows neatly, you can use Windows' Snap feature to assign them to predefined areas on the screen. Alternatively, you could enable the **Slick Window Arrangement** mod. Once done, your program windows will become aware of each others' presence, so even if a window doesn't fit into one of Snap areas, you can drag it alongside another window on your screen and the two will snap together – as though magnetically attracted to each other. Check the mod's installation page for an animation of how this works 1.

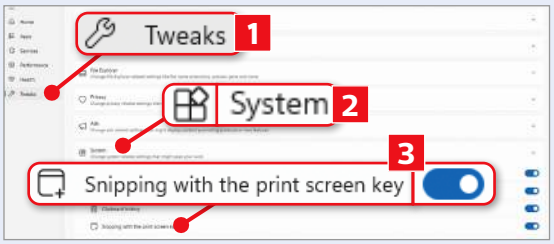
Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Make PrtScn key open Snipping Tool

I've been using Wintoys (www.snipca.com/54456) since your review in Issue 708 (page 18) and it's the best tool I've ever used for customising Windows. I'm sure every reader who has downloaded it could give their favourite tip, so here's mine.

Launch Wintoys then click Tweaks (1 in our screenshot) followed by System 2. Now turn on the 'Snipping with the print screen key' slider 3. This suits me because I still instinctively reach for the PrtScn key to take a screenshot. I can't get the hang of pressing the Windows key+Shift+S shortcut to open Snipping Tool (though this still works even if you turn on that slider).



I assume there's a hack within Windows that does the same thing, but I've not been able to find it. Tweaks like this make Wintoys essential. It must have enough potential tips to fill an entire issue of *Computeractive*.

Terrence Day

Terrence wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433**

HARDWARE

Switch to a mechanical keyboard

Having used computers for the best part of three decades, I finally bought my first ever mechanical keyboard when the receiver of my faithful seven-year-old Logitech keyboard started playing up. I felt I was due an upgrade and I have to say I thoroughly recommend the models from Hong Kong company Keychron.

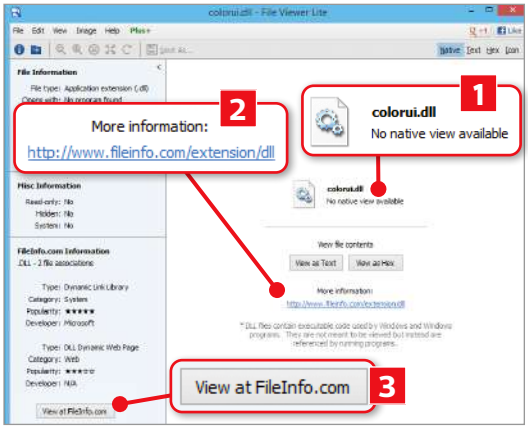
I bought the V6 Max QMK keyboard, with the 'Gateron Jupiter Brown' switches (£99 from www.snipca.com/54674, both pictured below left). It's quieter and more comfortable than my old keyboard, and has also increased my words-per-minute rate when typing. I'd heartily recommend it to anyone.

Hefin Davies

SOFTWARE

Get format information from FileInfo.com

I've opened several old files using File Viewer Lite (www.snipca.com/54451), recommended in Issue 708 (page 63), but there were one or two it didn't recognise (1 in our screenshot above right). I then read the program's User Manual (available in the Help menu) and saw that you can find more information on a file by clicking the link below 'More information' 2. This takes you to details on the format provided by the site FileInfo.com. There's also a link to FileInfo.com's main page in the bottom-left corner 3.



Gordon Ashby

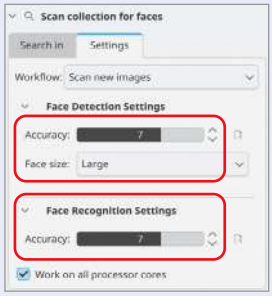
Why I stopped using...

Google Photos

I was disappointed in 2021 when Google Photos added high-quality photos to your free-storage allocation (15GB). I had been looking since for a free program that has decent facial-recognition tools, which was the only reason I'd been sticking with Google.

And what I use instead...

I was hopeful that **digiKam** (www.snipca.com/54395) in Issue 708's Workshop (page 38) would prove a good alternative. I followed your instructions and found it worked as smoothly as you suggested. You said it identified 260 photos in one minute. My results were similar: 290 photos in about 80 seconds.



It might not be as advanced as Google's method, but for a free program it's terrific. I know Google's £16 annual fee for 100GB isn't extortionate, but all those subscription costs do mount up.

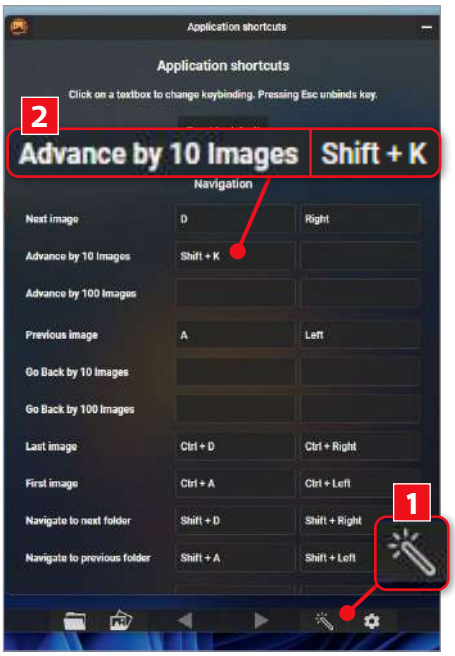
Like you, some of the results didn't contain faces, so I had to remove those. It also recognised the faces of statues. I avoided those in later searches by increasing the accuracy of the Detection and Recognition sliders (pictured).

Tony Sanderson

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Handy hints and tips from your fellow readers

Email us your tips: letters@computeractive.co.uk



Reader recommends...

Ugreen Nexode Pro 65W Ultra-Slim Charger Plug

£46 from www.snipca.com/53448

I bought Ugreen's Nexode Pro 65W Ultra-Slim Charger Plug after your review in Issue 702 (page 28). It's been one of my best purchases in many years. My wife and I regularly travel around the UK, Ireland and abroad. We already had a number of chargers with interchangeable UK/EU pins, but they all seemed flimsy and we were always unsure how safe they were.

By contrast, Ugreen's pins are easy to change and totally secure – once locked in. During previous travels we always brought two or three chargers, but during a recent holiday we only used Ugreen's charger to power both our Android phones and an iPad at the same time. All three charged quickly.

My only bugbear is the long 'bit' below the plug. In some hotel rooms there's not enough room to plug it in with leads attached. It would have been better if the USB sockets were at the side of the charger.

Brian Pike

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

SOFTWARE

Choose keyboard shortcut for skipping images

In Issue 708's review of PicView (www.snipca.com/54457, page 19) you mentioned the effects and filters you can apply to photos by clicking the Magic Wand icon (1 in our screenshot above). Another handy option in this menu is changing the keyboard shortcuts that launch specific tasks. I like that you can set a shortcut to skip forward 10 photos when browsing them – I've chosen Shift+K 2.

Paula Sheldon

BROADBAND

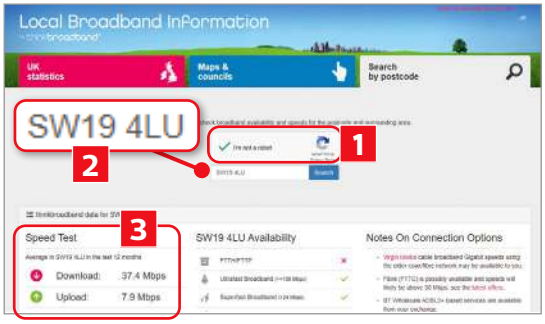
Compare your speed with others nearby

The broadband maps from Thinkbroadband that you've written about recently are interesting. While browsing the roadworks map from Issue 708 (www.snipca.com/54492) I noticed the site also has a tool for testing your speed. You can then compare that to other speeds in your area.

Visit www.snipca.com/54677, enter your postcode and internet provider, then click Run Test. It will run two download and two upload tests. You'll see the results in a graph. If you take multiple tests over time, click the green History button to see how the results have changed.

Now click the Compare Result button at the bottom, tick the CAPTCHA box (1 in our screenshot below left), confirm your postcode 2, then click Search. The download and upload results will be shown below 3.

Lawrence Wilson



VPNS

Build your own personal plan to save money

I was interested in Issue 707's feature 'Why you don't need a VPN' (page 60). I believe most of the reasons VPNs try to sell you their services are just attempts at marketing, but they do have their uses. I was shocked recently to find that most VPNs offer subscriptions in yearly instalments or exorbitant monthly plans, and it's just accepted.

It took some searching, but I found that Windscribe's 'Build- a-Plan' plan (www.snipca.com/54672) lets you customise the type of VPN service you need. I got mine down to just £2.40 a month with unlimited data. You just need to choose a few countries you'll connect to and you get a cheap monthly plan without data limits.

Sam Hiorns

HARDWARE

Check your Chromebook is compatible with your printer

My HP Compaq laptop was deemed unsuitable to upgrade to Windows 11. I used it mainly to browse the web, so I decided to try a Chromebook rather than another Windows laptop. I ordered a Lenovo IdeaPad Flex 3, with a 15.6in screen (£340 from www.snipca.com/54678, pictured) and I love it. It converts to a tablet, and is much faster than my old laptop.

There's one drawback I want to warn readers about. My two old printers, a Brother MFC-J6510DW and a Canon MG4250, are not compatible with the Flex 3, or any Chromebook. I'd advise readers to check their printer works with a Chromebook before buying one.

David Jones

WINDOWS

Copy, paste and rename folders

Roy Simpson's problem in Issue 708 (page 68) – 'Why have my image-file thumbnails disappeared?' – is one I'm familiar with. The steps you suggest didn't work for me, and I'm not confident enough to change any registry settings. I simply copy and paste an existing folder then delete its contents. I then rename this folder, and it's like creating a new one.

Nora O'Flynn

Browser Tips

EDGE

Access and tweak settings more easily

Compared with Chrome and Brave, the Settings pages in Edge have long been rather sprawling, making you scroll through dozens of options to find the one you want. The more features Microsoft added to the browser, the more packed and unwieldy these pages became.

Edge 136, released 1 May, finally fixes this problem by streamlining several Settings sections. When you open the browser's Settings (type edge://settings in the address bar), you're now greeted with a simplified Profiles page, which provides 'Top settings' shortcuts to important options in a row across the top. These include 'Clear browsing data', 'Manage cookies' and 'Download location' (for changing your default download folder).

However, the biggest improvement is to the 'Privacy, search and services' section (edge://settings/privacy), which was previously the messiest page. Again, this provides shortcuts to key settings such as 'Typo protection' and 'Tracking prevention' (1 in our screenshot), but goes further by organising all the section's settings into concise categories.

These include Privacy, Security and 'Search and connected experiences' 2, with each page containing only a handful of options, rather than a lengthy list. It makes finding and tweaking the browser's settings much easier than before, without losing useful tools.

Edge's 'Appearance', 'Cookies and site permissions' and 'System and performance' settings have been similarly condensed to simplify navigation.

FIREFOX

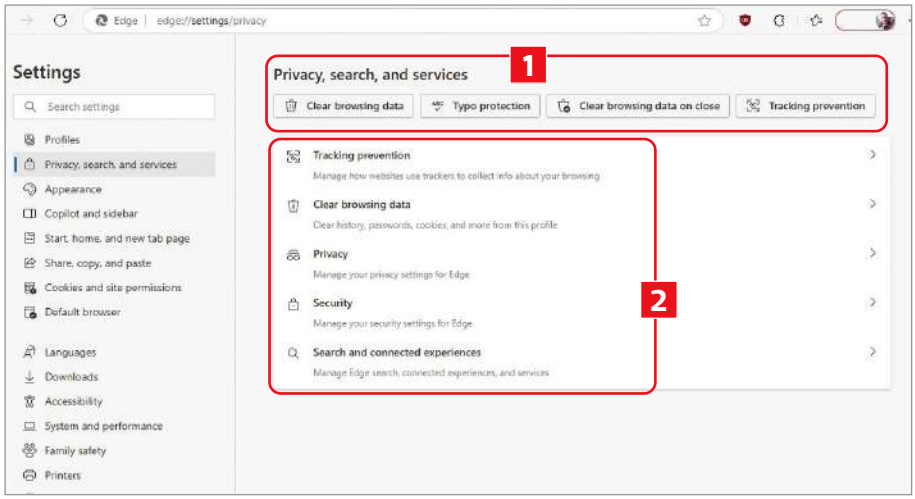
Sign PDF documents directly in the browser

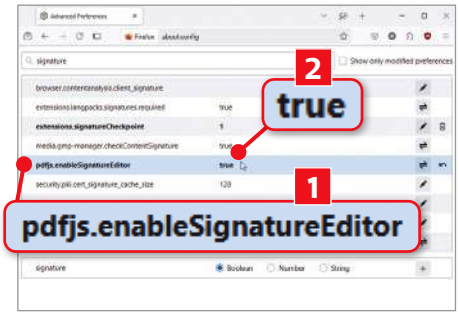
The built-in PDF viewer in Firefox is far superior to the one in Chrome (Edge's is pretty good, to be fair). As well as viewing PDFs, you can edit them by adding annotations, highlights, text and images.

Firefox 137, released in April, adds another useful option to the PDF viewer, which lets you sign documents directly in the browser without needing to install an extension. This makes it ideal for inserting your signature in PDF forms, contracts and letters, especially because it saves your personal scrawl for use in future.

To try the new option, import a PDF into Firefox, either by dragging it into the browser window or by right-clicking the file and choosing 'Open with' then Firefox. Click the 'Add signature' button on the toolbar in the top-right corner of the PDF viewer – its icon is a pen signing a document – then follow the instructions in our Workshop below.

If you don't see the new 'Add signature' button, you can enable it manually. Type about:config in the browser's address bar, press Enter and click 'Accept the Risk and Continue'. Find the preference pdfjs.enableSignatureEditor (1 in our screenshot below) and double-click it to change its value from 'false' to 'true' 2. Reload the PDF viewer and you'll now see the signature option.

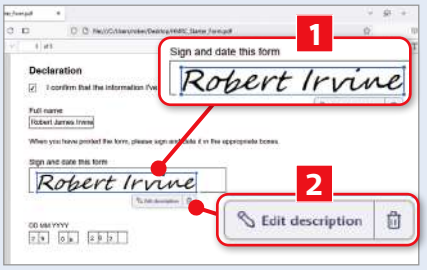




WORKSHOP Add your signature to PDFs in Firefox

1 Click the 'Add signature' button and select 'Add new signature' 1. You now have three choices: you can either type your signature (Firefox will make it look handwritten 2), use a steady hand to draw it or upload an existing image of it.

2 If you make a mistake, click 'Clear signature' 1 to start again. You can optionally enter a description of the signature for easy reference. Once you're happy with the result, ensure the 'Save signature' box is ticked 2, then click Add 3 to confirm.



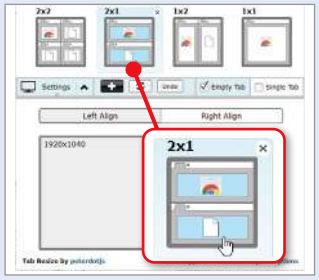
3 To insert your signature in a document, click the 'Add signature' button and select the signature you created. Drag it to the desired position on the page 1 and resize if necessary. Click the bin icon next to 'Edit description' 2 to remove the signature.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Splitting your screen

Tab Resize

Chromium

www.snipca.com/54655



Google is reportedly testing a split-screen mode for Chrome that will let you view two tabs side by side. Edge already offers this feature and Brave added it recently (see Issue 709, page 42). While waiting for Chrome to catch up, you can use Tab Resize to browse two or more pages at the same time. Rather than split the current window, it offers a choice of split-screen layouts that use separate windows. For example, choose the '2x1' layout (see screenshot) to stack one window on top of another, or '1x2' to view them side by side. You can also click the plus-sign button to create your own layouts, comprising as many columns and rows as you want. Click the '1x1' layout to return to a single window.

If you don't like that, try...

Split Tab

Chromium

www.snipca.com/54657

This extension splits the current window into two when you right-click a page and choose 'Open in Split Tab'. However, some pages fail to load after splitting.

OPERA

Upload recent files more easily

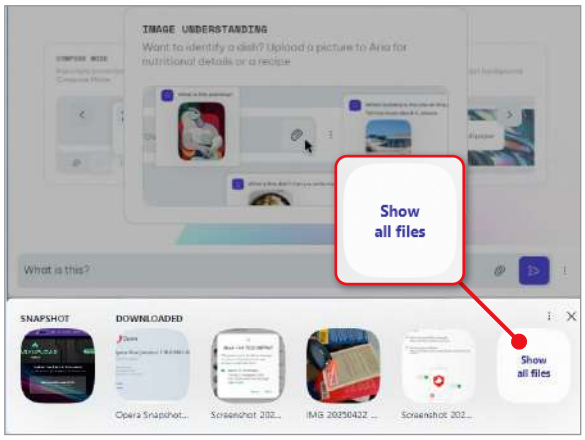
Opera 118, released mid-April, improves the browser's Easy Files feature. This makes it easier to upload files to online services – and to Opera's AI assistant Aria – without needing to root through folders to find them.

Easy Files works by displaying your most recently opened and saved files when you click an Upload, Add or Attach button. It assumes (usually correctly) that these are the items you're most likely to share.

Previously, Easy Files provided a pop-up list of items, but the revamped feature adopts a smarter visual approach. It shows thumbnails of your recent files, so you can instantly see what they are, organised into categories such as Snapshot (screenshots), Clipboard and Downloaded. If you don't see the item you want, click 'Show all files' (see screenshot below) to browse folders in File Explorer.

Clicking a file in the Easy Files panel adds it to Opera as an upload or attachment. The updated version lets you select multiple files at once so you can upload them all in one go.

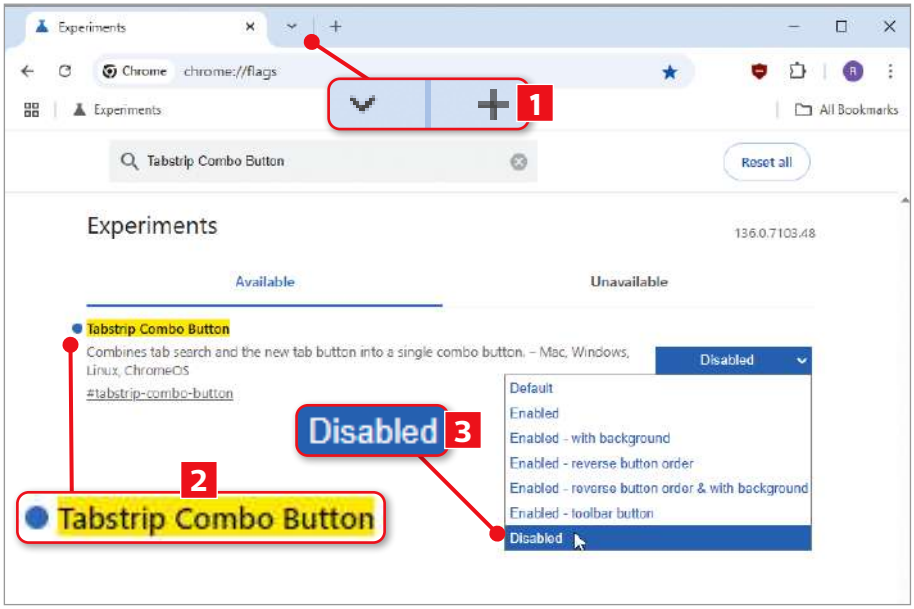
To disable the feature and upload files in the traditional way, click the Opera menu button in the top-left corner and choose Settings. Select 'Features', scroll down to Easy Files and turn the option off.



CHROME

Separate the 'Search tabs' and 'New tab' buttons

In Issue 701 (page 42), we wrote about a new experiment in Chrome that merges the 'Search tabs' and 'New tab' buttons into a single 'combo button' on the tab bar. The idea is presumably to encourage more users to try the tab-search feature, which is easy to miss in its traditional position in the top-left corner of the browser.



Chrome 136, released at the end of April, makes the combo button official and enabled by default (1 in our screenshot above). The change has already proved controversial, because users are accidentally clicking 'Search tabs' when they want to open a new tab. Thankfully, it's simple to undo.

Type chrome://flags in the browser's address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Find the experiment Tabstrip Combo Button 2, select Disabled in its dropdown menu 3 and relaunch Chrome.

This will separate the buttons and move the tab-search option back to its original location in the top-left corner. Like many Chrome 'improvements', it's possible Google will eventually remove the ability to reverse the change.

Phone and Tablet Tips

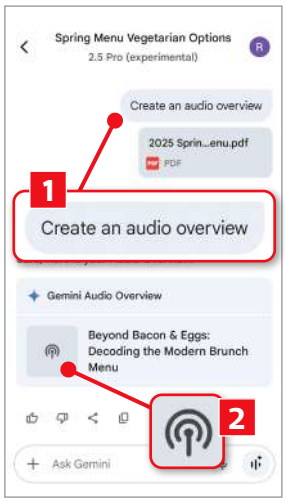
ANDROID & iOS

Generate 'audio overviews' in Google Gemini

In our 'Complete Guide to AI' feature in Issue 706 (page 57), we enthused about the Audio Overviews feature in Google's NotebookLM tool. This generates podcast-style conversations from sources you provide, in which two human-sounding male and female voices discuss the content.

Audio Overviews has now been added to Google's AI assistant Gemini, allowing you to create conversations in its app for Android (www.snipca.com/54663) and iOS (www.snipca.com/54664). This complements Gemini's text-to-speech option, which reads documents aloud to you – and is a lot more fun.

To try the feature, tap the plus sign on the left of the Ask Gemini message box and select a document or PDF you want to turn into an audio overview. Type 'Create an audio overview' (1 in our screenshot right) and tap the Send button.



Gemini will now generate your audio overview – this can take up to five minutes, depending on the size of the file (we've used a restaurant menu). Once done, it will display a notification with a 'Play Audio Overview' link, or you can tap the podcast icon within the chat 2.

The audio overview will play in a Google Video tab in your browser, where you can pause, fast-forward, rewind and adjust the speed of the conversation. The results are amazing and really do sound like two real (American) people are discussing your file.

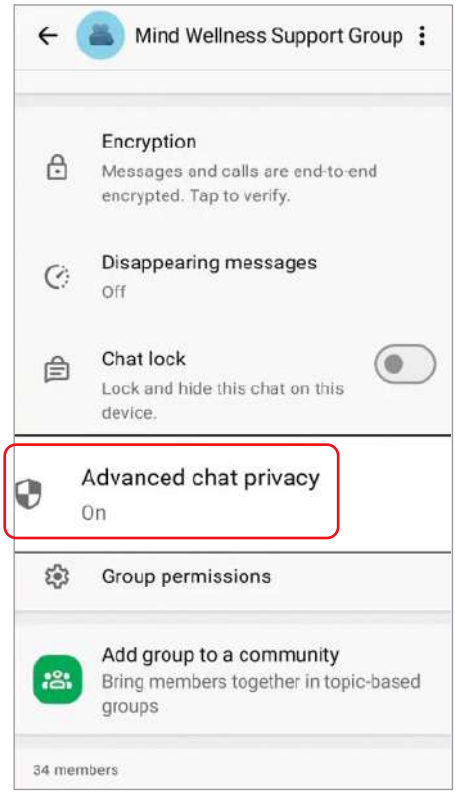
Audio Overviews is available to all Gemini users. If you get a message saying you've reached your free limit for the day, switch to the '2.0 Flash' language model.

ANDROID & iOS

Stop people sharing your WhatsApp chats

Although WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption to keep your conversations private, they can still be compromised by the 'Export chat' feature. This saves chats in a ZIP file that can be shared to other apps – and with other people.

To address this privacy concern, WhatsApp has introduced an 'Advanced chat privacy' option, which prevents specific chats from being exported if they contain sensitive information. It also stops other people downloading photos and videos from the conversation, and is available in both one-to-one and group chats.



To activate the new option in WhatsApp for Android, tap the three-dot menu button in the top-right corner of a chat and choose 'View contact'. Select 'Advanced chat privacy' and switch the feature on. In group chats, tap 'Group info' in the three-dot menu, select 'Group permissions' and turn on 'Edit group

BEST NEW APPS

What you should install this fortnight

Opera Mini

Free

Android www.snipca.com/54679

Opera Mini is a streamlined version of the browser, which reduces mobile-data usage, blocks ads (though it shows some of its own) and loads web pages faster. It has now integrated Opera's AI assistant Aria, so you can ask questions as you browse the web and get informed answers. Aria also generates images from text prompts.

Edits

Free

Android www.snipca.com/54675

iOS www.snipca.com/54676

Edits offers an easy free way to record and edit videos on your phone, with tools for adding audio, text and images, as well as applying a wide range of filters and effects. Although it requires an Instagram account, you don't have to share your videos on that service, and can export them at up to 4K quality without watermarks.

Remind Me with Lately

Free*

iOS www.snipca.com/54673

This app improves your punctuality by reminding you when to leave so you'll arrive on time. It notifies you 30, 10 and five minutes before the recommended departure time, and can also display a countdown timer. You earn points for arriving early at your destination – whether you're driving or walking – and lose them for turning up late.

*Contains in-app purchases

settings'. Go back to the'Group info' screen and enable 'Advanced chat privacy' (see screenshot left) .

In WhatsApp for iOS, select a chat and tap the name of the person or group. Choose 'Advanced chat privacy' and turn the feature on. Note that the option is rolling out gradually, so you might not see it yet.

ANDROID

Open and annotate PDFs directly in Chrome

Some websites provide important information in PDF format rather than on a web page. Examples include bus timetables, restaurant menus and product manuals. When you click these PDF links in your desktop browser, they open in a new tab, but on your phone or tablet you usually need to download the file and open it in a PDF viewer.

Not only is this inconvenient, but it means your device's Downloads folder soon fills up with PDFs you probably only looked at once. So we're pleased that Chrome has finally addressed this problem by opening PDFs directly in a new browser tab, rather than making you download them.

In the Android app, you can also annotate the PDF. Tap the pencil icon in the bottom-right corner of the PDF viewer (see screenshot above) to write on the document with a red pen, highlight sections in yellow and save a copy of the result.

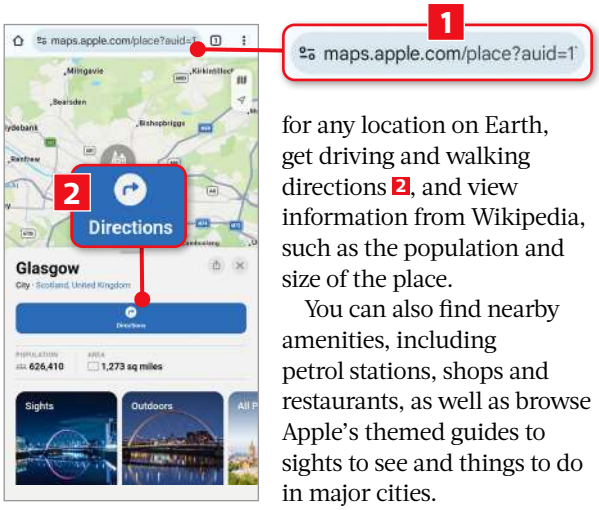
When you *want* to download a PDF, so you can read it offline later, long-press the link on the web page and choose 'Download link'.

ANDROID & iOS

Explore the world with Apple Maps

Until last year, Apple Maps was only available to iPhone and iPad users. But in July 2024, Apple launched a web-based beta version of the mapping service, which you could access in certain browsers – namely Chrome and Edge – on your PC.

This online version of Apple Maps has now exited beta (though oddly it's still labelled 'Beta'), and is also available for the first time on Android phones and tablets. Apple hasn't gone as far as creating a Maps app for Android – for that, you still need iOS – but you can access the service by visiting https://maps.apple.com in your mobile browser (1 in our screenshot right).



Although not as feature-packed as Google Maps, Apple Maps lets you search for any location on Earth, get driving and walking directions 2, and view information from Wikipedia, such as the population and size of the place.

You can also find nearby amenities, including petrol stations, shops and restaurants, as well as browse Apple's themed guides to sights to see and things to do in major cities.

BEST APPS FOR... Making photos more private

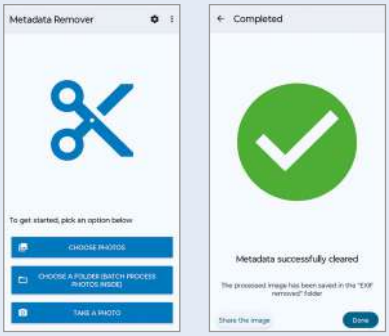
Photo Metadata Remover

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54683

This app removes EXIF metadata from photos with a single tap. This stops anyone seeing when and where you took the pictures (and other revealing details) when you share them via other apps. Remove ads by paying £1.29 for a three-month subscription. For iOS, install the similar Exif Metadata (www.snipca.com/54684).

Best For Removing photo metadata



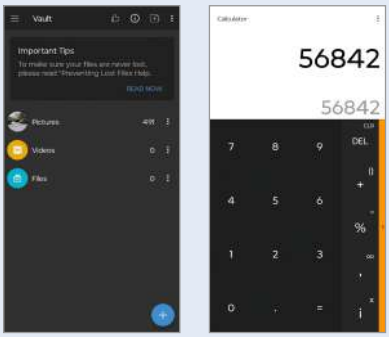
Calculator - photo vault

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54686

Use this simple app to hide private photos on your phone or tablet in a vault disguised as a calculator. The vault can only be unlocked by entering your passcode into the calculator then pressing its = key. You can choose which folders of photos to hide and to encrypt their contents too. For iOS, try Calculator# (www.snipca.com/54687).

Best For Hiding private photos in a vault



PrivacyBlur

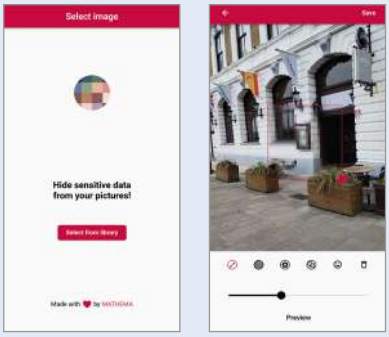
Free

Android www.snipca.com/54689

iOS www.snipca.com/54688

PrivacyBlur lets you blur or pixelate specific elements in photos that you want to keep private - such as human faces, car-registration numbers or property details. Just tap the area you want to conceal then use the tools below to adjust the size, style and shape of the blur. All the processing is done on your device, with no ads or tracking.

Best For Blurring sensitive details



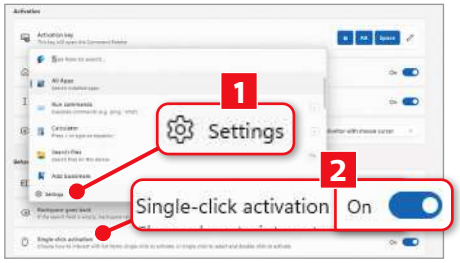
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Trigger commands in Command Palette with single click

In Issue 709 (page 60) we explained how to use the fantastic new PowerToys tool Command Palette. By typing commands into it you can search the web and files, switch windows, launch apps, open Settings and more.

By default, you need to click your mouse or trackpad twice to trigger a command, but you can change this to one click if you prefer. Open PowerToys, then click System Tools on the left followed by Command Palette. Make sure Enable Command Palette is switched on, then press Windows key+Alt+Space to open Command Palette. Now click Settings at the bottom left (1 in our screenshot below) then turn on 'Single-click activation' 2. The change applies straight away – you don't need to click OK or restart your computer.



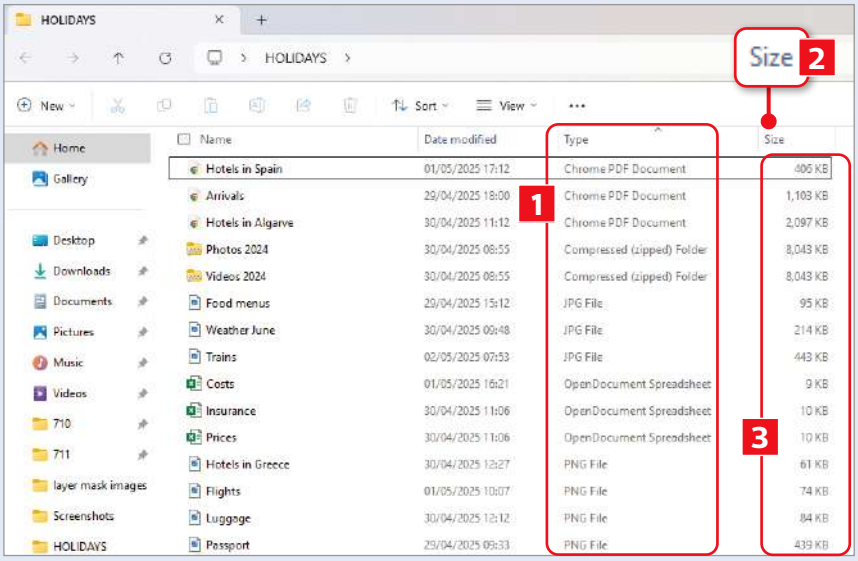
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Sort files by type then size

Click 'Type' in File Explorer and it will organise your files by type (ie, as JPEGs, documents, spreadsheets and so on 1). However, it doesn't order these files by size within the type group.

To do that you have to press down the Shift key, then click Size at the top 2.

We've done that and the files have stayed grouped by type – Chrome PDF Document, Compress (zipped) Folder, JPEG, OpenDocument Spreadsheet and PNG – but within those groups are now also ranked in size order 3.


HOLIDAYS
Size 2
1
3
Name
Date modified
Type
Size
Hotels in Spain 01/05/2025 17:12 Chrome PDF Document 406 KB
Arrivals 29/04/2025 18:00 Chrome PDF Document 1,103 KB
Hotels in Algarve 30/04/2025 11:12 Chrome PDF Document 2,097 KB
Photos 2024 30/04/2025 08:55 Compressed (zipped) Folder 8,043 KB
Videos 2024 30/04/2025 08:55 Compressed (zipped) Folder 8,043 KB
Food menus 29/04/2025 15:12 JPG File 95 KB
Weather June 30/04/2025 09:48 JPG File 214 KB
Trains 02/05/2025 07:53 JPG File 443 KB
Costs 01/05/2025 16:21 OpenDocument Spreadsheet 9 KB
Insurance 30/04/2025 11:06 OpenDocument Spreadsheet 10 KB
Prices 30/04/2025 11:06 OpenDocument Spreadsheet 10 KB
Hotels in Greece 30/04/2025 12:27 PNG File 61 KB
Flights 01/05/2025 10:07 PNG File 74 KB
Luggage 30/04/2025 12:12 PNG File 84 KB
Passport 29/04/2025 05:33 PNG File 439 KB

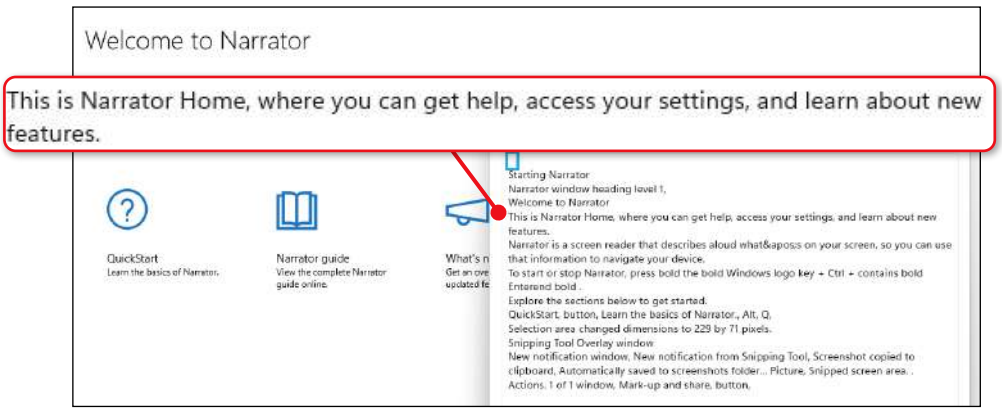
WINDOWS 11

See the last things Narrator said

You can now see the past 'strings' of text Windows 11's Narrator has spoken on your screen, making it easy to copy and paste any you need. These appear in the new Speech Recap box. To open it, first launch Narrator by pressing Ctrl+Windows key+Enter, then once it has read a passage of text press Narrator key+Alt+X (your Narrator key will either be Caps Lock or Insert).

Microsoft says Narrator will remember the past 500 strings, starting from scratch every time you open the tool. In our tests, a string was a complete sentence (see screenshot below). If you just need to copy the last phrase Narrator spoke, press Narrator key+Control+X. You can hear what the last phrase was by pressing Narrator key+X.

Speech Recap appeared in the optional Windows update KB5055627, released on 25 April, and was due to be included in May's compulsory Patch Tuesday update on 13 May.


Welcome to Narrator
This is Narrator Home, where you can get help, access your settings, and learn about new features.
QuickStart
Learn the basics of Narrator.
Narrator guide
View the complete Narrator guide online.
What's n
Get an ove
updated fe
Starting Narrator
Narrator window heading level 1,
Welcome to Narrator
This is Narrator Home, where you can get help, access your settings, and learn about new features.
Narrator is a screen reader that describes aloud what&aposs on your screen, so you can use that information to navigate your device.
To start or stop Narrator, press bold the bold Windows logo key + Ctrl + contains bold
Entered bold .
Explore the sections below to get started.
QuickStart, button, Learn the basics of Narrator., Alt, Q.
Selection area changed dimensions to 229 by 71 pixels.
Snipping Tool Overlay window
New notification window. New notification from Snipping Tool, Screenshot copied to clipboard. Automatically saved to screenshots folder., Picture, Snipped screen area. .
Actions. 1 of 1 window, Mark-up and share, button.

WINDOWS 11

Choose what appears in your Phone Link menu

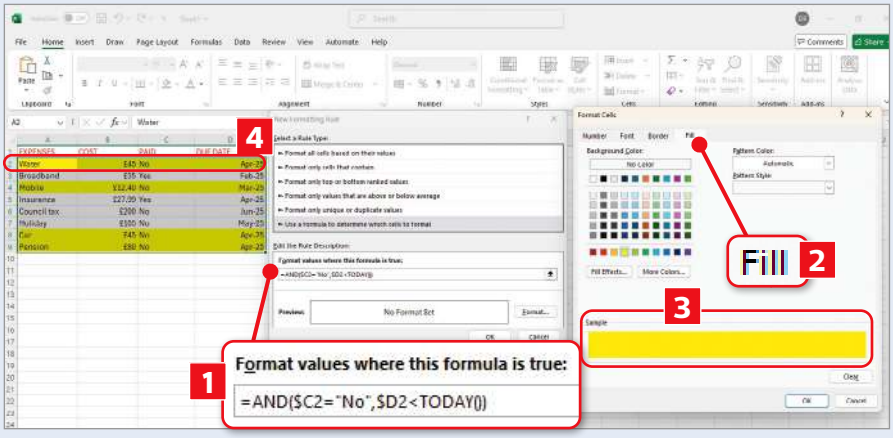
If you've set up Phone Link in Windows 11 (following Microsoft's instructions at www.snipca.com/52592) you'll see recent messages, photos and calls in your Start menu. If this brings too much clutter in your menu but you want to keep Phone Link switched on, click the three dots to the right of 'Send files' followed by 'Customise recent activity'. To stop any message, photo and call appearing, turn off the 'Recent content'. Alternatively, keep the slider turned on (1 in our screenshot above), then untick one of the boxes below to turn off just one or two of the alerts 2.

MICROSOFT EXCEL

Check which of your bills are overdue

By combining the formulas AND and TODAY you can work out which bills are overdue. In our example, we've added expenses to column A, the cost to B, whether they've been paid to C, and their due date to D.

We then selected every cell, then clicked the Home tab followed by Conditional Formatting, then New Rule. Next we clicked 'Use a formula to determine which cells to format', then typed `=AND($C2="No", $D2<TODAY())` – 1 in our screenshot. This formula checks if the payment status in column C is "No" (unpaid), and whether the due date in column D is before today's date.



We then clicked Format followed by the Fill tab 2 and chose yellow 3. When we clicked OK our overdue bills were highlighted in yellow 4.

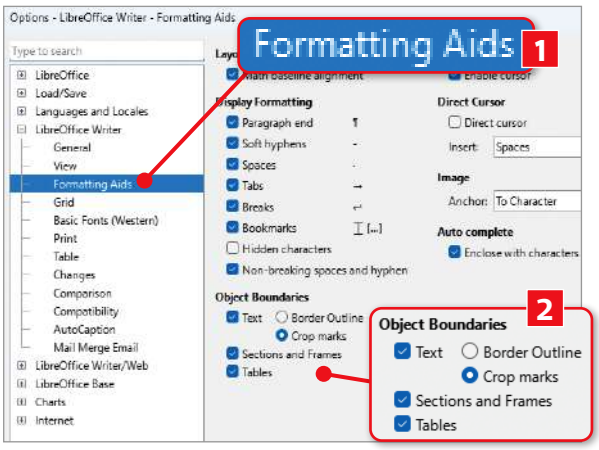
LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Remove boundaries around tables when showing formatting

In previous versions of LibreOffice Writer, if you wanted to see invisible formatting characters such as paragraph marks (¶) and tab presses (->) you were also shown faint grey outlines around pages, tables, frames and sections.

You can avoid this clutter in version 25.2, released in February. Click Tools, then Options (or press Alt+F12), then LibreOffice Writer on the left. Now click Formatting Aids (1 in our screenshot below) and choose which items under Object Boundaries you don't want to see boundaries around 2. Click OK to confirm.

Incidentally, to see formatting characters click View at the top, then Formatting Marks (or press Ctrl+F10).



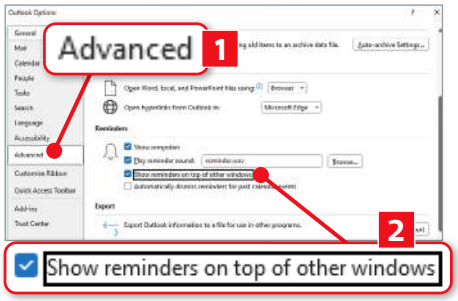
ONLYOFFICE

Press Ctrl and Shift to select multiple PDF pages

Version 8.3 of OnlyOffice, released in February, lets you press down the Ctrl and Shift keys to select multiple pages in a PDF.

Open a PDF in OnlyOffice, then click the Page Thumbnails icon on the left (1 in our screenshot above). A column will appear showing your pages 2. Hold down Ctrl as you click pages and the grey border around them will darken to indicate they've been selected 3. Any changes you make will apply to all selected pages.

The Shift option lets you select a range of consecutive pages. Press down Shift, then click the first and last page in the range to select them and all the pages in between.



MICROSOFT OUTLOOK

Show reminders on top of other windows

You can make Outlook show event, meeting and task reminders on top of all other windows you have on your computer, ensuring you notice them. In the old (classic) version of Outlook, click File at the top followed by Options at the bottom left, then Advanced (1 in our screenshot above). Scroll down to the Reminders section, then tick 'Show reminders on top of other windows' 2 followed by OK.

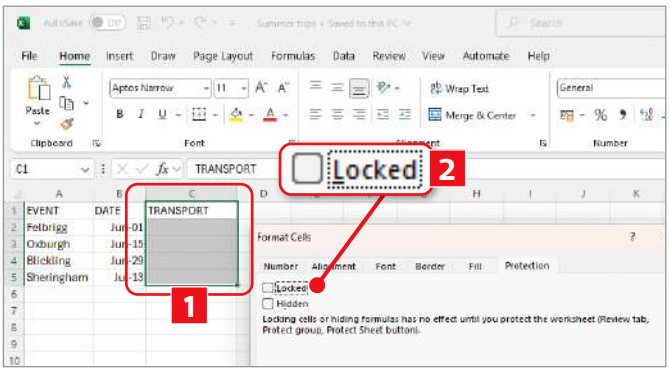
If you leave it unticked, reminders may pop up in your notification area or in a smaller window beneath other open windows, depending on your system settings.

In the new version of Outlook, click the cog at the top right followed by General, then Notifications. Now click the Calendar dropdown menu and you'll see three 'Notification styles': Reminder, Desktop and None. Choose either of the first two and your reminders will appear on top of all other windows.

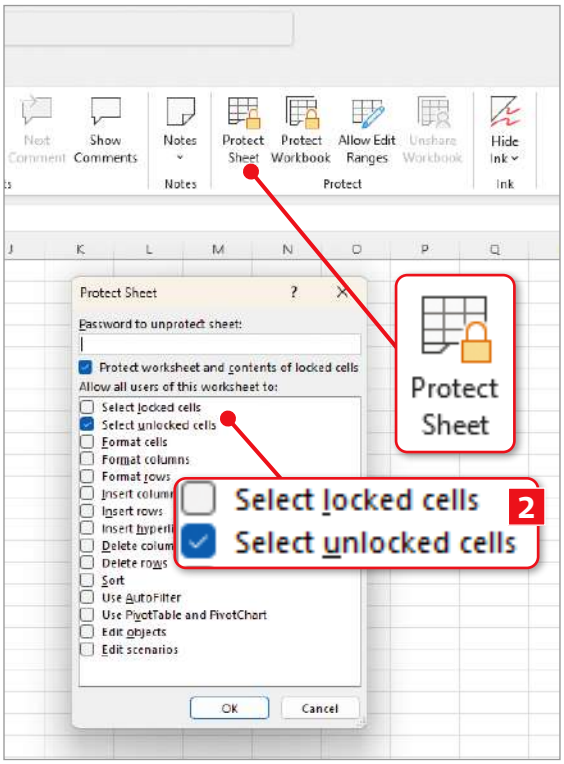
In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Lock/unlock cells in spreadsheets



Select the cells you want to keep unlocked then untick Locked...



...then click 'Protect Sheet' then untick 'Select locked cells' and tick 'Select unlocked cells'

When you share spreadsheets with club members, it's important they only add information you want them to, not make changes that can mess up your data. To do this, you'll need to lock/unlock rows and columns so members will only be able to type into specific cells.

Select cells in Excel, LibreOffice Calc & OnlyOffice

Open a spreadsheet in Excel, then select the cells you want to keep locked. Right-click these cells then choose Format Cells (or press Ctrl+1). Now open the Protection tab and make sure 'Locked' is ticked, then click OK. Now do the same for the cells you want members to type into (it's cells in column C in our example – 1 in our spreadsheet above) and untick Locked 2. Click OK.

Now click Review at the top followed by Protect Sheet (1 in our screenshot above right), then untick 'Select locked cells' and tick 'Select unlocked cells' 2. Click OK. You'll notice that Protect Sheet at the top changes to Unprotect Sheet. Send the spreadsheet to yourself to check it works before sending it to members.

The instructions in LibreOffice Calc are similar, with a few small changes. The tab you need to click after opening Format Cells is Cell Protection, and instead of Locked you need to make sure Protected is unticked. Click OK, then click Tools at the top followed by Protect Sheet. Next, untick 'Select protected cells' and tick 'Select unprotected cells'. Click OK.

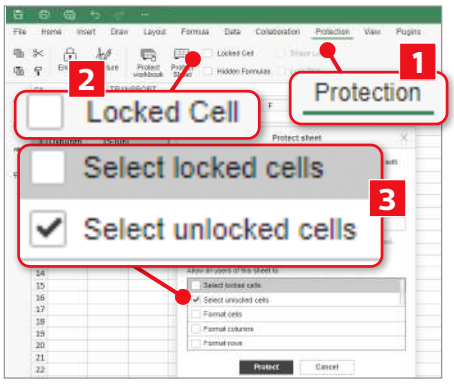
In OnlyOffice, select the cells you want members to access, then click the Protection tab at the top (1 in our screenshot below). Now untick Locked Cell 2, then click Protect Sheet and untick 'Select locked cells' and tick 'Select unlocked cells' 3. Click 'Protect' to confirm.

Set permissions in Google Sheets

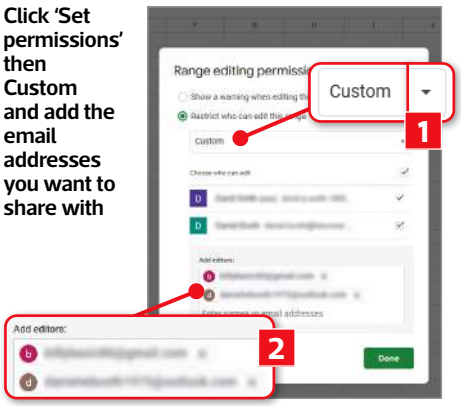
Because Google Sheets is an online tool, it doesn't save any changes you make to cells when you download a spreadsheet. Instead, to keep cells locked/unlocked, you need to type the email addresses of all the people you want to share them with.

Select the cells you want to keep locked. Right-click them, then click 'View more cell actions' at the bottom followed by 'Protect range'. Name this range of cells on the right (optional), then click 'Set permissions'. Keep both 'Restrict who can edit this range' and 'Only you' selected, then click Done.

Now select and right-click the cells to leave unlocked, followed by 'View more cell actions' then 'Protect range'. Click 'Set permissions' and this time select Custom (1 in our screenshot below) and enter the email addresses you want to share it with 2. Click Done to confirm.



Untick 'Locked Cell' in OnlyOffice, then tick 'Select unlocked cells'



Click 'Set permissions' then Custom and add the email addresses you want to share with

Next issue: Allocate session times for volunteers

What's All the

Fuss About...

Shoulder surfers

Microsoft has a solution for nosy parkers snooping on your screen

Who are they?

People who like to take a crafty peek over your shoulder when you're using your phone or laptop in public. Most of them are just being nosy – curious about what you're typing and to whom. But there are also plenty of criminals who do it to steal your login details when you unlock your devices and sign into accounts. It's a growing security threat.

Says who?

Several security experts in recent years. In 2023 Detective Superintendent John Roch, head of economic crime at the Metropolitan Police, said scammers are getting better at shoulder surfing. He described phones as being like "a bag of cash" if they fall into the wrong hands. His warning was echoed last year by Chris Ainsley, head of fraud risk management at Santander, who said "it's astonishing how many people still use their laptops on public transport without thinking about who's around them and what they can potentially see". But now Microsoft has a solution: Onlooker Detection.

What's that?

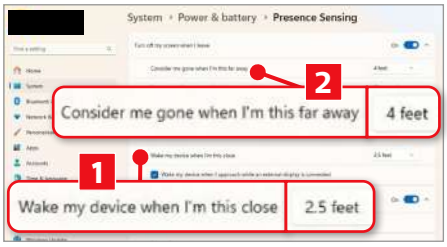
New technology that detects when someone is looking at your laptop's screen. It then dims the screen so they can't see anything on it and/or shows a notification to warn you of the snooper.

Sounds clever. But how does it detect them?

It uses a technique called presence sensing. Sensors beam infrared light to objects behind you and measure how long it takes to return. They use this information to build a depth map of the scene, helping it to detect human presence and track movement. Windows already does this to wake your screen automatically when you approach, or lock it when you walk away.

Does it? How do I turn that on?

Well, first check whether you have these options by opening Settings (Windows key+I) then clicking System, followed by 'Power & battery' then 'Screen and sleep' (or 'Sleep & hibernate time-outs'). There are several settings here, including how close (1 in our screenshot above) and far away 2 you need to be for the sensor to detect you. Microsoft explains more at www.snipca.com/54783.


System › Power & battery › Presence Sensing
2
Consider me gone when I'm this far away
4 feet
1
Wake my device when I'm this close
2.5 feet

If you see these settings then your laptop can detect human movement

Is there a chance I might not have the settings?

Yes. If you can't see them, your laptop probably lacks Human Presence Detection (HPD) hardware – meaning the required combination of sensors and processors. Qualcomm's Snapdragon X chips are built to work with HPD, as are some AMD and Intel processors. You can double check by searching for and opening Device Manager then clicking Sensors. Look for an IR Camera, Proximity Sensor, Presence Sensor or anything with ToF (Time of Flight) in the name. However, to add to the confusion, not all IR cameras support presence sensing.

And do many laptops support presence sensing?

Not yet, and those that do typically cost over £1,000. This is because it's aimed mostly at business users who have sensitive spreadsheets to hide, and can buy pricey laptops on expenses. A good example is HP's OmniBook X 14, which we gave a Recommended award to in Issue 694 (page 23) when it was priced £1,099. However, it's now gone up to £1,300 (see www.snipca.com/52075).

Is Onlooker Detection ready now?

No, but it's coming soon. It's been spotted by prolific Windows leaker PhantomofEarth, whose predictions on X are typically reliable (www.snipca.com/54780). Microsoft recently explained that Onlooker Detection waits five seconds between movements, so it won't constantly pester you with alerts just because someone is fidgeting behind you (see www.snipca.com/54781). This detail suggests the tool is imminent. When launched, it'll be the best way to give snoopers the cold shoulder.

WIPE ALL YOUR OLD DEVICES

Erase your personal data from unused devices, so you can sell or recycle them safely. Robert Irvine explains how to securely wipe your PC, laptop, phone, printer, TV and more

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Reset your PC and remove all the data stored on it
- Shred your deleted data to make it impossible to recover
- Erase your phone or tablet with a factory reset
- Wipe your Wi-Fi password from an old router
- Restore your wireless printer to factory settings
- Delete personal information from your smart TV

Most of us have a drawer or cupboard containing old phones, tablets, laptops and other devices we no longer use. We don't usually hang on to them for sentimental reasons, but because we're not entirely sure what to do with them.

Last December, a survey by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) found the average Brit has three unused devices at home (www.snipca.com/54746). While that statistic isn't surprising (aside from being on the low side), more interesting was the reason why.

The ICO revealed that 29 per cent of UK adults hoard their old tech because they don't know how to erase their personal information. Why risk hackers and nosy parkers gaining access to your data, when you can leave the device gathering dust at home?

That lack of knowledge (or confidence) is a shame, because lots of old tech has a potentially useful second life – whether you sell it online, take it to a recycling centre or donate it to a charity shop that accepts electrical items.

In this feature, we explain how to securely wipe all your data from all your devices, so it can never be recovered. You can then sell or recycle with total peace of mind, clear out your cupboards and drawers, and earn a little bit of extra cash.

WIPE YOUR DESKTOP PC & LAPTOP

Reset and wipe your PC through Windows

The simplest way to wipe your PC or laptop is to use the Reset option in Windows. This built-in feature removes all your personal files, software and settings, and can delete and overwrite all the data that's left behind, making it practically impossible to recover.

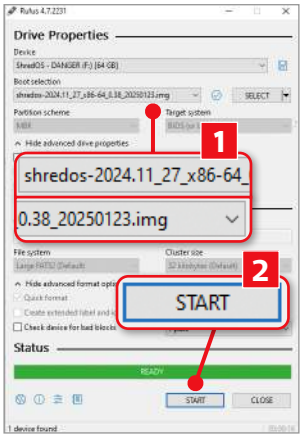
It's essentially a factory reset, and will reinstall Windows afterwards, either from the installation files stored on your PC, or by downloading the latest version from the 'cloud'. For most PC users, this option will be sufficient, but there's still a small chance someone could recover data using specialist software. If you've stored very sensitive files on your hard drive or SSD, consider using a more powerful third-party tool to 'shred' your data – as we'll explain in the next tip.

To access the Reset feature in Windows 10, open the Settings app and click 'Update & Security'. Choose 'Recovery' and click 'Get started' under 'Reset this PC'. In Windows 11, click Windows Update in Settings and select 'Advanced options'. Choose 'Recovery' and click Reset PC.

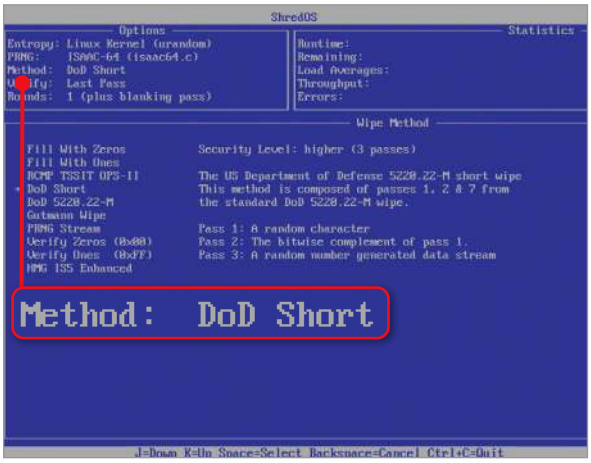
When the 'Reset this PC' window opens, click 'Remove everything' and choose whether to reinstall Windows from a 'cloud download' or from local files. As you won't be using the operating system if you're selling or recycling the PC, it's quicker to select 'Local reinstall' than download a fresh copy of Windows.

On the next screen, you'll see that Windows is set to remove apps and files, but not to clean the drive afterwards – and to delete files only from the drive it's installed on. To remedy this, click 'Change settings' and switch on the options to 'Clean data' (1 in our screenshot below left) and 'Delete files from all drives' 2, so that both say 'Yes'.

Click 'Confirm', double-check the settings are correct, then click Next. Finally, click Reset to wipe all data from your PC and reinstall Windows. This will take at least an hour.



Use Rufus to create a bootable USB stick that runs ShredOS

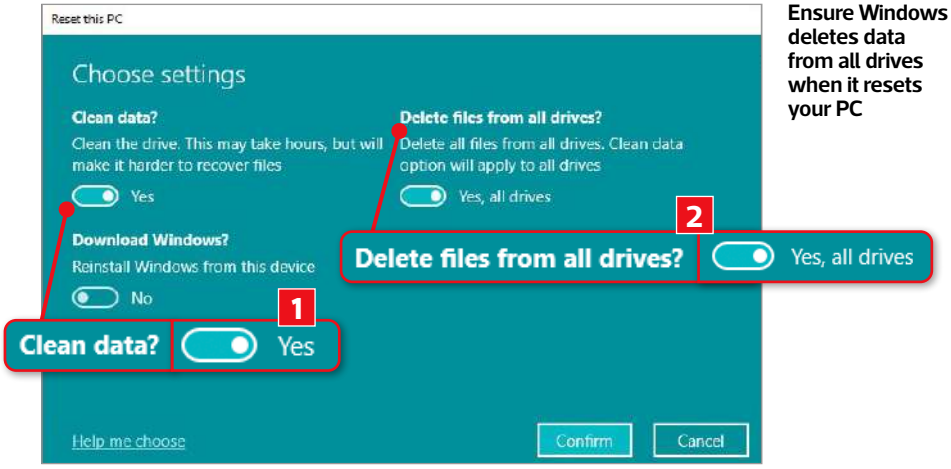


DoD Short will make your deleted data impossible to recover

Erase everything by 'shredding' your data

As mentioned earlier, the Reset tool in Windows overwrites all data after wiping your hard drives. It does so by writing binary zeroes to every sector of the drive, but only performs a single 'pass', which Microsoft considers sufficient to make deleted files unrecoverable.

For total peace of mind before you sell or dispose of your PC, use a third-party tool to overwrite your data using multiple passes and techniques (not just zeroes) – a process known as 'shredding'. The best free option used to be 'Darik's Boot and Nuke' (DBAN, www.dban.org), but this hasn't been updated for 10 years and the company that owns it now refers website visitors to its paid-for software.



Ensure Windows deletes data from all drives when it resets your PC

Instead, we recommend ShredOS, which – like DBAN – runs from a USB stick to erase everything on your computer, including Windows. It's a very powerful tool that boots from your computer BIOS or UEFI, so it's not to be used lightly, but it lives up to its name by thoroughly shredding your data.

To download the latest version of ShredOS, click the 'ShredOS.img x86_64bit for USB Vanilla' link on its GitHub page (www.snipca.com/54711). Also download and run the free tool Rufus (www.snipca.com/54712) to create a bootable USB stick. Insert the stick in your PC (the stick must have at least 1GB of storage), click the Select button and choose the ShredOS image file (1 in our screenshot above left). Click 'Start' 2 and Rufus will format and wipe the USB stick, and write ShredOS to the drive. The USB stick will be renamed 'ShredOS – Danger' (we did warn it wasn't to be used lightly).

Next, you must set the USB stick as the boot drive so that your PC boots ShredOS rather than Windows. For this you need to access the boot menu. The method varies between computers but usually involves pressing F8, F12 or Esc during startup (see www.snipca.com/54713 to see which key to use for different PC brands). Set the USB drive as the primary boot device, then restart your PC.

ShredOS should now load. Select a drive to erase, then press the Space bar to activate the 'wipe' command. You can do this for multiple drives. Now press M to choose the wipe method – the best option is DoD Short (see screenshot above). This performs three passes, securely overwriting your data using zeroes, ones and a random pattern, to make it impossible to recover. The other DoD

option performs seven passes, but this is overkill and can take days. Press Space to select DoD Short, then Shift+S to start shredding – be prepared to wait several hours for the process to complete.

Once it has wiped your PC, ShredOS offers to generate a PDF report. This confirms it has erased everything, and provides SMART data for each drive. It saves this to the USB stick, so you can print it to give to the PC's new owner.

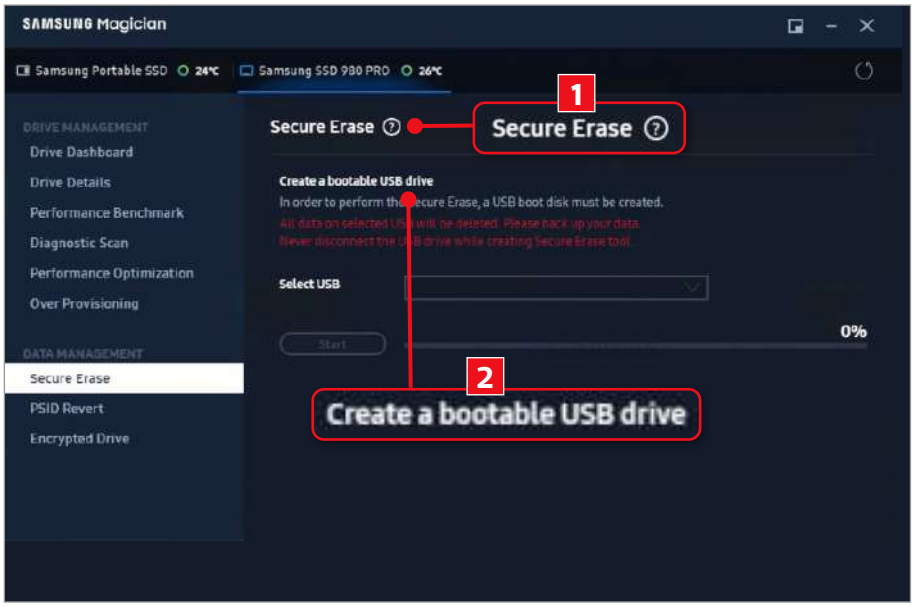
Completely wipe data from an SSD

Although Windows Reset can securely erase an SSD, the process of overwriting data isn't as effective as with a mechanical hard drive. This is because certain blocks in the SSD's flash memory are unavailable to the operating system, so traditional overwriting methods won't touch their data.

Filling an SSD with random data also reduces its lifespan and performance (SSDs have a limited number of 'writes'), which the new owner won't thank you for. ShredOS (see previous tip) includes the 'Gutman Wipe' method, which erases solid-state memory, but a simpler and safer method is to use the Secure Erase tool provided by the SSD's manufacturer.

Download the manufacturer's software for your SSD – examples include Seagate SeaTools (www.snipca.com/54524), SanDisk Dashboard for SanDisk and Western Digital drives (www.snipca.com/54716) and Samsung Magician (www.snipca.com/54714, pictured above right). Select the Secure Erase (or just Erase) option 1 and follow the instructions to wipe your SSD completely – you'll need to create a bootable USB drive 2, so have a stick handy.

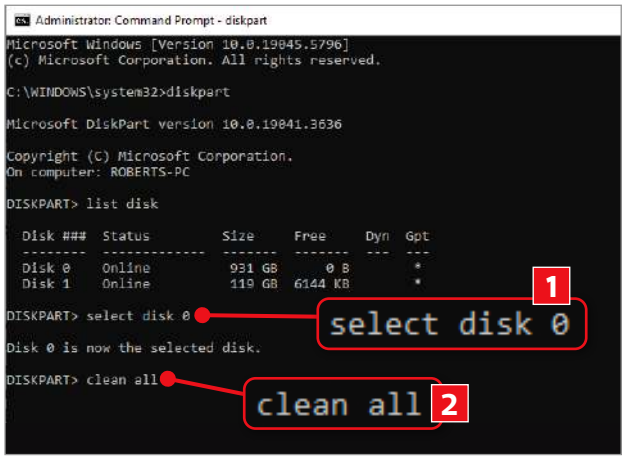
Alternatively, your PC's motherboard may provide a Secure Erase option in the UEFI/BIOS. Enter this by pressing the appropriate key after restarting (see www.snipca.com/54718 for details) and look for Secure Erase – it's usually on the Security or Tools tab. Select the option then your drive and confirm the deletion.



SSD manufacturers usually include a Secure Erase option in their software

Wipe drives using DiskPart

You can also use the DiskPart tool in Windows to wipe hard drives and SSDs – though not the boot drive for the operating system. It runs from the command line and includes a 'clean all' command that removes partitions and overwrites data.


Administrator: Command Prompt - diskpart
Microsoft Windows [Version 10.0.19045.5796]
(c) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
C:\WINDOWS\system32>diskpart
Microsoft DiskPart version 10.0.19041.3636
Copyright (C) Microsoft Corporation.
On computer: ROBERTS-PC
DISKPART> list disk
Disk ### Status Size Free Dyn Gpt
Disk 0 Online 931 GB 0 B *
Disk 1 Online 119 GB 6144 KB *
DISKPART> select disk 0
Disk 0 is now the selected disk.
DISKPART> clean all
1
select disk 0
clean all
2

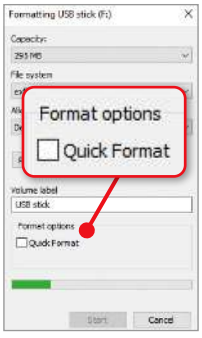
DiskPart can wipe hard drives and SSDs from the command line

Type cmd in the search box, then click 'Run as administrator' under Command Prompt. Type the command diskpart, press Enter then type list disk and press Enter again. This will list every drive attached to your PC and its disk number.

Type select followed by the disk number of the drive you want to erase, for example select disk 0 (1 in our screenshot above) – you should be able to tell the disk number from the size – and press Enter. Now type clean all 2, press Enter again and DiskPart will securely wipe the drive.

Can I wipe drives using File Explorer?

When you format an internal or external drive through File Explorer, by right-clicking it and choosing Format, Windows warns it will "erase ALL data on this disk". But while files and folders may appear to be deleted, a quick format doesn't wipe them. It merely creates a new file system on the drive, and



erases the 'map' Windows uses to locate files. The actual data remains on the drive until it's overwritten by new data.

This means files can be recovered easily using free tools such as Recuva (www.snipca.com/54719) and Wise Data Recovery (www.snipca.com/54720). That's obviously handy if you accidentally delete an important item, but it's a huge privacy and security risk when selling or recycling your computer.

A full format *does* overwrite data with zeroes (once), making recovery more difficult – untick the Quick Format box (see screenshot) to use this option. However, you can't format the drive Windows is stored on unless you run a third-party tool from a USB stick, or use Windows Reset (see page 50).

WIPE YOUR PHONE & TABLET

Back up your data and remove accounts

Before you factory-reset a phone or tablet ahead of selling or recycling it, there are a couple of extra precautions to take. The first is to back up important data such as photos, videos, documents and messages to your Google or Apple iCloud account.

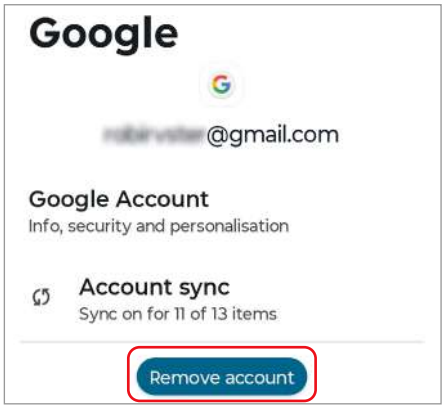
On an Android device, open the Settings app and tap Google followed by Backup, then 'Back up now'. On an iPhone or iPad, open Settings, tap your name and choose iCloud, then iCloud Backup. Press 'Back Up Now' to save your data to the cloud.

The second step is to remove all accounts from the device, to ensure the new owner can't access your data. It also helps recycling companies, because your old phone or tablet won't be locked to an online account.

To do this in Android, open Settings and select 'Passwords & accounts' (this may also be called Accounts, 'Users & accounts' or 'Passwords, passkeys & accounts'). Select your Google account and tap 'Remove account' (see screenshot above right). Also remove your accounts for email and social-media apps, and anything else that could compromise your privacy or cost you money.

On a Samsung phone or tablet, go to Settings, tap 'Cloud and accounts' (or 'Accounts and backup') and choose

Sign out of your Apple and iCloud accounts on your iPhone or iPad



Remove your Google account before resetting your Android device

Accounts. Select and remove both your Google and Samsung accounts.

Next, switch off Find My Device (this is either in the Google section of Settings, or in 'Security & privacy' or Location, depending on the model and Android version). Also turn off the screen lock so the new owner can unlock the device. Finally, sign into your Google account in your desktop browser (www.snipca.com/54723) and click 'Security' then 'Your devices'. Select your phone or tablet and click 'Sign out'.

On an iPhone or iPad, open the Settings app, tap your name and press Sign Out (see screenshot below left). Enter your Apple Account password and tap Turn Off – this should sign you out of your iCloud account and the 'iTunes & App Store' too.

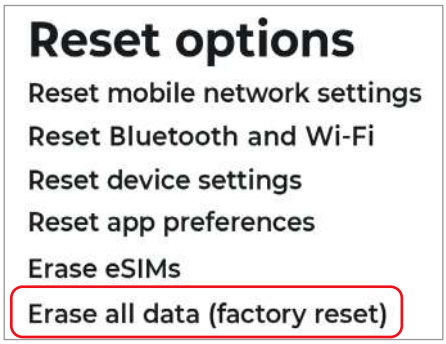
If you're switching to a non-Apple phone or tablet, you should also select Messages in Settings and deactivate iMessage, as well as FaceTime to disable that feature.

Additionally, remove your iPhone or iPad from your list of Trusted Devices so it no longer receives two-factor authentication codes. Tap your name, then 'Sign-In & Security' followed by Trusted Devices. Choose the device and tap 'Remove from Account'.

Wipe your Android device with a factory reset

Once you've backed up your data and removed your accounts, you're ready to factory-reset your phone or tablet. This is surprisingly simple, but remember you can't reverse the reset (there are several warnings along the way).

The exact instructions for Android vary by device and version, but generally involve opening Settings and choosing System, then 'Reset options'. This may also be located in Privacy, 'Back up and



Factory-reset your Android phone or tablet to erase all data

reset' or 'General management' (on Samsung devices), and may be labelled 'Factory data reset'.

Choose 'Erase all data (factory reset)' (see screenshot above) or similar, confirm the reset using your PIN, password or pattern, and tap the 'Erase all data' or Reset button. You can perform the reset twice to ensure all data is overwritten, though the built-in encryption on your device means this isn't necessary.

You should manually encrypt old devices running Android 5 (2014) or earlier, so their data can't be recovered. Go to Settings, then Security, select 'Encryption & credentials' and tap 'Encrypt phone' (or tablet). Follow the instructions to perform the encryption.

Newer Android phones also provide the option to erase eSIMs. If you do this, remember to contact your network to reactivate your account on your new phone.

If you're worried your data could still be recovered, you can use a shredding app to wipe the free space on your phone or tablet and erase all leftovers. The best option is the powerful iShredder (www.snipca.com/54724) – see page 54 to find out how to use it.

Factory-reset your iPhone or iPad

To wipe your Apple iOS device, open the Settings app, tap General and press 'Transfer or Reset iPhone' (or iPad). Tap 'Erase All Content and Settings' to review what will be wiped – this should include 'Apps and Data', your Apple Account and the Find My feature (see screenshot on page 54).

Tap 'Continue', enter your passcode or Apple Account password and tap 'Erase iPhone' or 'Erase iPad'. If your iPad uses an eSIM, you'll be asked if you want to erase that as well.

All iPhones and iPads are now encrypted by default using your passcode, which includes Face ID or Touch ID. On older devices (from before 2013), you can encrypt your data manually by tapping 'Touch ID & Passcode' in Settings. Select 'Turn Passcode On' and create a six-digit passcode. Apple doesn't allow shredding apps in its App Store, but the combination of encryption and the factory reset will be enough to make your data unrecoverable.

Don't forget to remove your SD card before you sell or recycle your device, in case it contains personal data – see opposite page to learn how to wipe it.

Erase This iPad
Erasing will sign out of your Apple Account and remove your personal data, so this iPad can be safely traded in or given away.
The following items will be safely removed from this iPad:
Apps and Data
21.73 GB
Apple Account
Dennis IT
Find My
Activation Lock

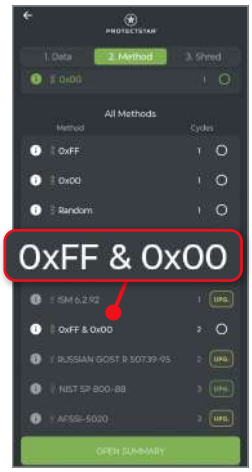
Erase your apps and data, Apple account and Find My details

Shred free space on your Android device

As mentioned on page 53, iShredder is the best Android app for ensuring deleted data can't be recovered. It's a freemium tool, with some features limited to its Pro and Military versions – priced £1.39 and £2.29 a month respectively – but will wipe free space for free.

To run iShredder, you'll need to install it from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/54724). This means signing back into your Google account *after* you've performed a factory reset. However, you can choose not to re-import data by tapping 'Leave and get reminder' during the setup process. Stop your old apps reinstalling by selecting 'Manage apps and devices' in the Play Store app then 'Cancel all updates'.

When you open iShredder, accept its terms and conditions, and tap Selective Erase. It will ask for permission to 'modify and delete the contents of your shared storage'. Tap 'Allow' and switch on 'Allow access to manage all files'. Tap 'Selective Erase' again, then tap Free Space and select Internal Storage – or External Storage to erase an SD card. Press 'Continue' and choose one of the four free shredding methods – the most thorough is '0xFF & 0x00' (see screenshot left), which performs two passes.



The free version of iShredder includes four data-shredding methods

Tap 'Open Summary', tick the box confirming your data will be permanently erased, then press Shred. The iShredder app will now wipe all the free space on your phone or tablet, to make any remaining data impossible to recover. This can take a while, but you can cancel the erasure at any time by tapping Stop Shred.

Once the deletion is complete, iShredder generates a report to confirm its success and tell you how much data was securely erased. You'll now need to factory-reset your device again.

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WIPE YOUR ROUTER & PRINTER

Delete sensitive data from your router

We don't tend to think of routers as storage devices, so you may not think twice about dropping your old one off at a recycling centre, or selling it on eBay. But your router actually contains lots of sensitive information about your home network, which could compromise your privacy and security if accessed by someone else.

This includes your Wi-Fi password, SSID, the IP addresses of devices that connect to your network and even basic logs of your internet traffic. You can view and delete these logs by signing into your router's settings in your web browser, but the best way to wipe all its data is to perform a factory reset.

Thankfully, most routers make this easier than any other device. Look on the back or side for an external Reset button or a small hole with the button inside (pictured above right). Press the button, or insert a paperclip or pin into the hole, for at least 10 seconds.

This will reboot the router and its indicator lights will blink as it returns to its default factory settings. The reset process might take a few minutes.

If your router doesn't have a Reset button, check the support site of the manufacturer or your internet provider. For example, the Sky Max Hub requires you to press its WPS button for 30 seconds to perform a reset (www.snipca.com/54734).

Wipe data from your router by long-pressing its Reset button or inserting a pin into the hole

Wipe sensitive data from your printer

Your old printer is another device you'd never suspect of compromising your security – unless you've left a confidential document in its output tray. The 'volatile' memory in a printer only stores details of print jobs during the current session, which is cleared when you switch it off.

But many modern printers – especially multi-function models – also have 'non-volatile' memory, which retains information about the documents you print and scan. Although this may just be the names and timestamps of print jobs, it's still a privacy concern.

More worrying is that a Wi-Fi printer's non-volatile memory saves details of your home network, including the SSID and password. It may even store your email address if you use its direct email printing function, and be connected to online services such as Google Drive and Microsoft 365.

For all those reasons, it's important to factory-reset your printer before selling or recycling it. You can usually do this through the device's control panel, though the steps vary by make and model, so check the manufacturer's support site.

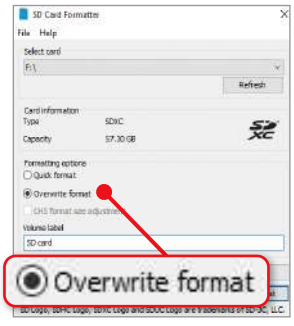
For example, on most HP touchscreen printers, go to Setup, then Tools (or Printer Maintenance) and choose Restore Factory Defaults. On Canon printers, choose 'Device settings' (or similar) in the Setup menu and choose 'Reset settings'. And on an Epson printer, look for a Restore Default Settings option in the Settings or Maintenance menu.

Ensure your factory-reset your printer before you sell or recycle it

You should also be able to reset your printer through the manufacturer's desktop software or mobile app. In HP Smart for Windows, for example, click Printer Settings, then Advanced Settings. Click the Settings tab and choose Restore Factory Defaults under Restore Defaults (see screenshot above). You should also sign into your online dashboard on the manufacturer's website and remove the printer from your account.

Erase your SD card before recycling

As with USB sticks, you can wipe SD cards before you dispose of them by inserting them in your computer and formatting them through File Explorer (see page 52). They'll be recognised as a drive, so all you need to do is right-click them and choose Format. You can also erase the card using DiskPart (again, see page 52).



However, the SD Association (www.sdcard.org), the official organisation that governs memory-card standards, recommends using its own SD Card Formatter tool to format your cards. This is optimised for that type of removable media and prevents any degradation in performance.

Free to download from www.snipca.com/54740, the program gives you the option to overwrite deleted data when formatting (see screenshot). It supports all SD standards, unless the card has been encrypted using the 'BitLocker to Go' feature in Windows.

If your PC doesn't have an SD card slot, you can format it on your Android device (iPhones and iPads don't support memory cards). Go to Settings then Storage, select your SD card and tap the three-dot menu. Choose Format, then Format again to erase the card. To ensure no data can be recovered, wipe its free space afterwards using iShredder (see page 54).

WIPE YOUR SMART TV, SPEAKER & STREAMING STICK

Erase everything from your smart TV

Smart TVs run a close third to PCs and phones in terms of the amount of personal data they contain. This means that, unlike 'dumb' TVs, you shouldn't sell or recycle them, or donate them to a charity shop or friend, without first performing a factory reset.

For starters, your smart TV stores your account details for all the streaming services and other apps you've signed into. Although this data is encrypted, most TV apps don't require you to log in each time you open them, so anyone else who uses the TV can instantly access your accounts and potentially make purchases in your name.

Additionally, your smart TV's operating system – such as Google TV, Tizen or webOS – saves lots of personal information in your profile. This includes your viewing history, favourite channels and shows, search queries, downloaded apps and even your voice if you've used voice-control features. It may also store your payment-card details.

As with all smart devices, your TV saves your Wi-Fi password and other network information, including the IP addresses of other devices you connect to it. If hackers got hold of this data, they could take control of your entire smart home.

Factory-resetting your smart TV will wipe all your apps (other than those that came installed), network settings, personal info and accounts, so you can sell or recycle it without compromising your privacy and security. On most sets, the option is easy to find, but may require a PIN – this is usually 0000 or 1234, unless you've changed the default.

For example, on Samsung TVs, go to Settings, then General, select Reset and enter the PIN. On an LG TV, choose General in Settings and look for the Reset option. On Sony Bravia TVs powered by Android/Google TV, go to Settings followed by Device Preferences (or System) and choose Reset. Select 'Factory data reset' then 'Erase everything' (see screenshot below).

Many streaming sticks, including Chromecast, have a physical Reset button

Press the reset button(s) on your smart speaker to erase your data

For other TV models, consult the manufacturer's support site or manual.

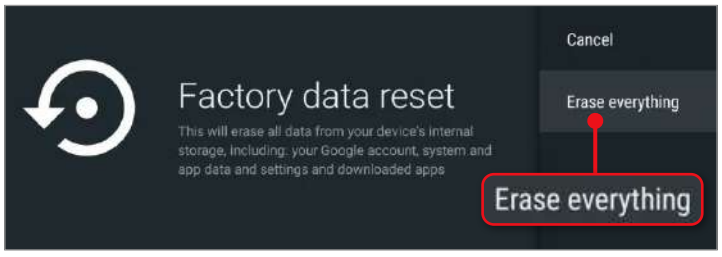
Factory-reset your TV-streaming stick

Streaming devices such as the Fire TV Stick, Google Chromecast and Roku Express store most of the same personal data as smart TVs, and are much easier to dispose of without considering the privacy risks. They're also directly linked to your accounts with the respective companies, allowing for purchases through their stores.

To factory-reset your Fire TV Stick, open Settings and choose My Fire TV. Select 'Reset to Factory Defaults', then Reset. On a 'Chromecast with Google TV', go to Settings, then System and choose About. Select 'Factory reset' then 'Factory reset' again.

The Chromecast also has a physical Reset button on its underside (pictured above) – earlier models have one on the back or side – which is handy if you've lost your remote control. Press this until the light starts flashing yellow, then release the button when the light turns white – this will begin the reset process.

To reset a Roku stick, open the Settings menu and choose System. Select 'Advanced system settings' followed by 'Factory reset'. Your device may also have a physical Reset button or pinhole.


Cancel
Factory data reset
This will erase all data from your device's internal storage, including: your Google account, system and app data and settings and downloaded apps
Erase everything
Erase everything

Factory-reset your smart TV to remove all your personal information

Clear all data from your smart speaker

Your Amazon Echo or Google Home/Nest speaker has been listening to you since you bought it, so don't let it pass on what it's heard to someone else. As well as recording your voice, it also knows your Wi-Fi password and network details; stores the routines, skills and actions you've added; and may control other smart devices in your home.

Your smart speaker is also linked to your Amazon or Google account, providing direct access to its content and settings. Thankfully, resetting the device is very straightforward.

On an Amazon Echo, press the Action button (the one with a circle icon) for about 20 seconds. On older speakers, press the microphone and volume-down buttons simultaneously (as pictured above). The light ring will turn orange, then blue, then off, then orange again to indicate the speaker has been reset.

Alternatively, reset your Echo through the Alexa app. Go to Devices, then 'Echo & Alexa' and select your device. Tap the Settings cog and choose Factory Reset – you can also deregister the Echo from your Amazon account.

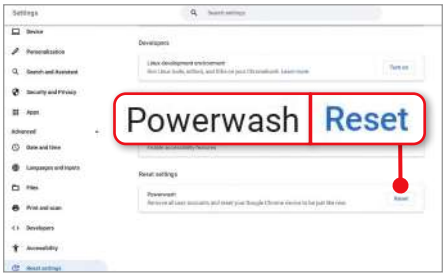
Google Home/Nest speakers have different reset buttons depending on the model. On the original Home speaker, you need to press the microphone button for about 15 seconds. Later models have a dedicated Reset button, or require you to press the power and volume or both volume buttons simultaneously. You'll hear a chime to confirm the factory reset.

WIPE YOUR CHROMEBOOK & EBOOK READER

Powerwash your Chromebook

Chromebooks work in the 'cloud', so they don't store a great deal of data, aside from files you save to your Downloads folder. However, because you use your Google account to sign in, it's essential to wipe a Chromebook before you sell or recycle it. This will stop anyone else accessing your Gmail, Drive and other Google services. The Chromebook may also contain details of websites you've visited, Wi-Fi networks you've connected to and other personal information and settings.

You can factory-reset your Chromebook using a feature called Powerwash. Click the clock in the bottom-right corner of the screen, followed by the Settings cog. Scroll to the bottom of the page and click Advanced. In the 'Reset settings' section, click Reset next to Powerwash (see screenshot above right), then Restart. This will wipe your Chromebook and restore it to factory settings.



Chromebooks can be factory-reset using their Powerwash feature

Alternatively, you can use a keyboard shortcut to access Powerwash from the login or lock screen. Press Ctrl, Shift, Alt and R at the same time, and your Chromebook will display a 'Reset this Chromebook' page. Click the Powerwash button (bottom right) and choose Continue to perform the factory reset.

It's also a good idea to disconnect the Chromebook from your Google account. Go to the 'Your devices' page in your browser (www.snipca.com/54739), select the Chromebook and click 'Sign out'.

Reset your Kindle and deregister it from your Amazon account

Factory-reset your ebook reader

Although your Kindle or other e-reader won't contain as much personal data as a phone or tablet, you should still reset it before you sell or recycle the device. This will remove your Amazon account information, meaning no one can make purchases in your name, and delete any ebooks and other files you've downloaded.

To reset your Kindle, go into Settings and select 'Device options'. Choose 'Factory reset', 'Reset device' or 'Reset to Factory Defaults' (on a Kindle Fire) and tap Reset to erase your Kindle.

You should also deregister the old Kindle from your Amazon account. Go to your Devices page on the Amazon website (www.snipca.com/54727), select your Kindle and click Deregister (see screenshot above).

To reset a Kobo e-reader, tap the More option in the bottom-right corner of your Home screen, choose Settings and tap 'Device information'. Select 'Factory reset' then press 'Reset now'. ca

Five devices you *don't* need to wipe

Mouse

A mouse doesn't store any personal data, so can be disposed of safely. Even wireless mice that assign specific actions to buttons don't save your Wi-Fi password. However, you should unpair an old Bluetooth mouse from your PC after you stop using it.

Keyboard

Like a mouse, a keyboard is an input device that doesn't save any data – whether it's wired or wireless. Some high-end keyboards (such as for gaming) have onboard memory for storing custom profiles and macros, but nothing compromising.

Monitor

Unless your monitor is a smart model that supports apps – such as the Samsung Smart range – there's no need to factory-reset it before selling or recycling. It doesn't store any personal information, so can simply be unplugged and passed on.

Headphones

Bluetooth headphones don't store personal data such as passwords, though they may retain details of devices they've been paired with or settings you've customised. A factory reset isn't essential, but will give the next owner a fresh start.

USB hub

You may wonder if a USB hub that's had numerous devices plugged into it might have absorbed some of their data. But hubs are merely conduits for data and power, and don't have their own storage.

NEXT ISSUE On sale Wednesday 4 June

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CHATGPT vs The Rest

We compare the best AI chatbots (our results might surprise you)

PLUS

- **Should you ditch Windows 10 for Linux?** We explain the pros and cons
- **What the dark web knows about you** Scammers are using your data

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ISSUE 703 | 12 – 25 FEBRUARY 2025
Miss Daisy drives scammers mad – page 9
Learn something new in every issue
NEVER LOSE WI-FI
Set up mobile hotspots on your PC & phone p35
BREAK WINDOWS' WORST RULES
Do what Microsoft REALLY doesn't want you to – take back control! p50
Beat Windows 11's upgrade specs
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Remove AI tools you don't need

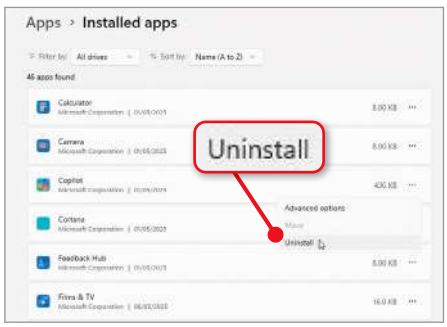
Some tech companies are forcing their AI features on us, whether we want them or not. **Robert Irvine** explains how to hide or disable these unwanted tools

The past few years have seen an AI frenzy, with all the big tech companies competing to add the latest cutting-edge technology to their products. But while many of these tools are genuinely innovative and exciting, some are being foisted on us whether we want them or not.

Here we explain how to remove AI features you don't need from websites and software you use every day. Look out for the new AI Tips section in our next issue.

Copilot in Windows and Edge

It's fair to say that a large proportion of Windows users don't share Microsoft's enthusiasm for its AI assistant Copilot. But that hasn't stopped the company adding Copilot to many of its programs and apps, and even introducing a Copilot key for new PC keyboards (www.snipca.com/54770).



Microsoft now lets you uninstall Copilot from Windows 10 and 11

Copilot's integration with Windows 11 (and later Windows 10) initially meant it couldn't be removed, which hardly endeared the AI tool to users. Microsoft has since made Copilot easier to hide and uninstall in Windows and other software.

To remove the Copilot button from the taskbar in Windows 10 or 11, simply right-click its button and choose 'Unpin from taskbar'. If you can't see that option, right-click the taskbar, choose 'Taskbar settings' and switch off Copilot.

To uninstall it, open the Settings app and choose Apps then 'Apps & features' (in Windows 10) or 'Installed apps' (in Windows 11). Select 'Copilot' or the three-dot icon next to its name, and click Uninstall (see screenshot below left).

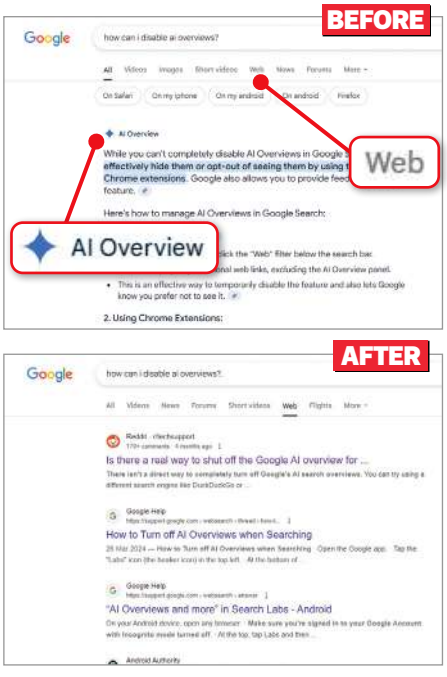
You can't remove Copilot from Edge, but you can hide its button. Click the browser's three-dot menu button and choose Settings then 'Copilot and sidebar'. Select 'Copilot' under 'App and notification settings' and switch off 'Show Copilot button on the toolbar'.

AI Overviews in Google search

Since last year, Google has provided AI Overviews for many search queries. These appear above your main search results and summarise relevant content from online sources to save you visiting those sites individually.

Although potentially useful, AI Overviews can slow down your searches and sometimes contain false or misleading information. Google is also testing an AI Mode feature, which lets you ask questions about places and products to get AI-generated answers (www.snipca.com/54764). However, this is currently 'opt in', whereas AI Overviews don't have an off switch – Google says they're now a "core feature".

Thankfully, there are workarounds if you find the feature more of a hindrance than a help. One is to click the Web filter below the search box (see Before image below), which will display standard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How to Turn off AI Overviews when Searching
"AI Overviews and more" in Search Labs - Android

Hide AI Overviews from Google search results by clicking the Web filter

search results without AI Overviews (see After image below left).

Another option is to install the extension Hide Google AI Overviews in your Chromium browser (www.snipca.com/54766) or Firefox (www.snipca.com/54768). Additionally, adding -AI to your search queries, for example pause Windows updates -AI, will hide AI summaries. More crudely, some Google users have found that adding a swear word to queries stops AI Overviews appearing.

Leo in Brave

Like Copilot in Edge, Brave's AI assistant Leo is enabled by default and becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Leo now appears in the browser's toolbar, sidebar, address bar, main menu and right-click menu, which is annoying if you never use the AI tool.

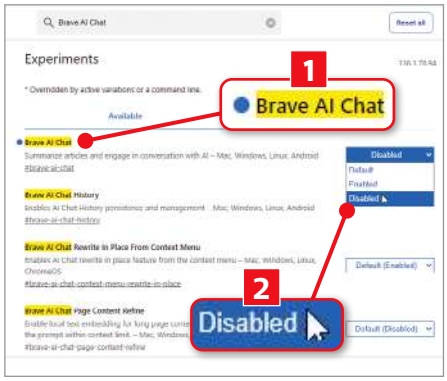
You can reduce Leo's presence in Brave by going to the Leo section of the browser's Settings (brave://settings/leo-ai) and switching off the options 'Show Leo icon in the sidebar' and 'Show Leo in the context menu'. Also right-click its toolbar button and choose 'Hide Leo AI icon'.

However, this won't disable Leo or remove the feature from other locations in the browser. To do that, type brave://flags in the address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Search for Brave AI Chat (1 in our screenshot below left), select Disabled in its dropdown menu 2 and relaunch Brave. When the browser reopens, all traces of Leo will have disappeared. You can re-enable the AI tool later if you change your mind.

Apple Intelligence in iOS

When Apple released iOS/iPadOS 18.3 in January, it enabled its new AI (Apple Intelligence) feature by default. Although this includes some useful tools, provided you have a compatible iPhone or iPad (visit www.snipca.com/54775 for a list of compatible models), most are rather underwhelming, especially compared with Google Gemini and ChatGPT.

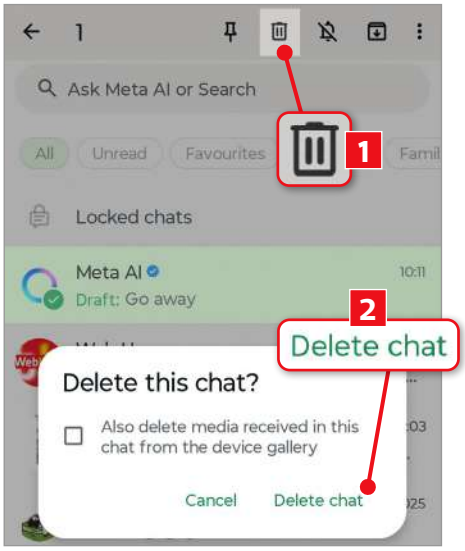
Worst of all, Apple Intelligence takes up at least 7GB of storage, whether you use it or not. To disable it and free up space, open the Settings app on your iPhone or iPad and select 'Apple Intelligence & Siri'. Switch off Apple Intelligence, then tap Turn Off Apple Intelligence' (see screenshot below) to confirm.



Disable Brave AI Chat to remove the Leo AI tool from the browser

Language
English
Talk & Type to Siri
Allow Siri When Locked
Apple Intelligence features like Writing Tools will not be available if you continue.
Siri will also stop using the additional capabilities provided by Apple Intelligence.
Turn Off Apple Intelligence

Turn off Apple Intelligence to reclaim space on your iPhone or iPad



You can't remove Meta AI but you can delete your chats with it

Meta AI in WhatsApp

The new Meta AI chatbot in WhatsApp is the most controversial AI addition of the year (so far). Represented by a blue-and-purple circle, it sits just above the 'New chat' button on your Chats screen, where it's easy to tap and launch by accident.

Some WhatsApp users may find Meta AI useful, but the widespread negative reaction suggests most don't and actually resent having the feature foisted on them (www.snipca.com/54751). What's more, although Meta claims the AI tool is "an optional service", there's no way to hide or remove it from the app.

Until Meta introduces that option, you can at least mute notifications from the AI tool. Tap the Meta AI button to start a conversation, then tap its name at the top of the chat. Select 'Notifications', switch on 'Mute notifications' and choose Always. You can also remove it from your Chats list by long-pressing your conversation and tapping the bin icon (1 in our screenshot above) then 'Delete chat' 2.

If you're desperate to get rid of Meta AI, your only option is to downgrade to a previous version of WhatsApp. To do this on an Android phone (it won't work on iPhones), back up your chat history, uninstall the current app then download and install the APK file for a pre-Meta AI version. Make sure you get this from a trustworthy source such as APK Mirror (www.snipca.com/54752).

However, installing old apps is risky, because they may contain security flaws that have since been patched. You'll also need to disable automatic updates to stop your phone downloading the latest version of WhatsApp and restoring Meta AI. ca

Coming soon: more AI annoyances

Undeterred by the backlash to its Meta AI tool, WhatsApp will soon introduce more AI features including one called Private Processing. This will give users access to online AI tools for summarising and rewriting messages, without breaking the app's encryption.

YouTube has started testing an AI Overviews feature, which will show relevant clips from videos at the top of your search results. This saves you having to click or tap through to watch entire videos, with the clips presented in a carousel. Understandably, many YouTube creators aren't happy about the idea, believing it will deprive them of viewers and ad revenue.

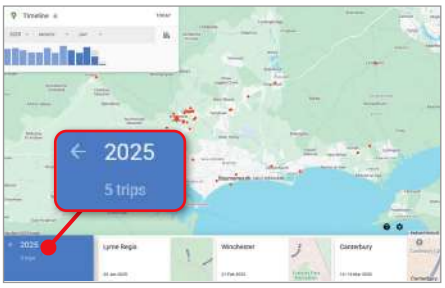
After adding Copilot to Microsoft 365 tools, Microsoft is testing a Copilot menu in its Paint app for Windows 11. This will let you access all Paint's AI features, though some are only available on Copilot+ PCs. And Edge could soon move Copilot from its sidebar to the new-tab page, where it will be impossible to avoid (see www.snipca.com/54778).

Rescue your Google Timeline

Google is changing the way it stores Timeline data. **Jonathan Parkyn** explains how to save your location history before it's gone forever

Originally called Location History, Timeline is a feature in Google Maps that uses GPS, Wi-Fi and mobile networks to keep track of your location at all times. It uses this data to create a detailed, searchable map of where you've been and when (see screenshot below). In Google's words, you can "go back in time" to see places you've visited in the past.

This makes Timeline a useful tool for retracing your steps on a given day, or logging your travel for work or fitness purposes. As you might expect, however, the feature has been a source of controversy, because it tracks your every movement in the real world and stores this information online, raising privacy concerns. Google is responding to these criticisms by making fundamental changes to the way Timeline works. You may already have received emails from the company telling you the changes are happening and that you need to take action.



The browser version of Timeline shows you where you've been, but it will be axed in June

What's happening to it?

Last summer, Google announced it would stop storing Timeline data on its servers, moving it to local devices instead. This means your location history data will now be stored on your computer or phone rather than on Google's servers.

Google hopes this will enhance your privacy by reducing the risk of third parties obtaining your location data, either through a data breach or requests from government agencies. The company is also addressing allegations that it misled users by continuing to track their movements after they disabled Timeline or Location History.

This is a positive move, but the changes will inevitably affect some of Timeline's key features. For example, tying location history data to a single device will make it difficult to create or view a single, unified Timeline using data from multiple devices. What's more, when your location history is no longer stored in the cloud, you won't be able to access Timeline through Google Maps in your browser.

Perhaps the biggest problem, however, is that after the switch, the company will delete all the Timeline data it currently holds, meaning you could lose years of location data if you don't take action.

What you need to do

If you don't want to lose your Timeline data, you need to save it before Google's deadline, otherwise the company will delete it and you won't be able to recover your location history. Confusingly, this deadline isn't the same for everyone.

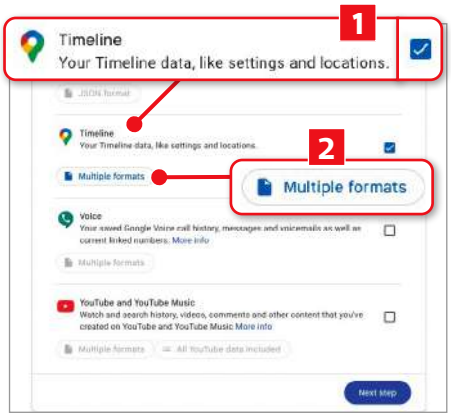
The ultimate deadline is Monday 9 June, but Google has decided to move users to the new system gradually. Some received warnings about the changes as early as June 2024. And it seems the company has given users six months to take action and save their data, starting from the date they received the initial warning email.

The first thing to do is check your emails for any messages from Google regarding the changes. The messages will have a title like 'Google Location History', and will tell you when Google plans to delete your Timeline data. If that date has already passed and you haven't saved your data, then unfortunately it's too late.

If on the other hand you're still within the deadline, follow these steps to save your location history to the new version of Timeline. However, there's something else we recommend you do first.

Export your location history manually

Whether you're switching to the new system or ditching Timeline completely, you may wish to save a manual copy of your location history. This will let you keep a record of your travels for your own purposes. You can also import your location history into other apps and tools including Google Earth, as well as Timeline alternatives such as those mentioned in the box opposite.



You can export your Timeline data manually using Google Takeout

It's essential that you do this before your Timeline deadline has passed, or before you switch to the new version of Timeline. In both scenarios, Google will delete your location data from its servers, and you'll no longer be able to download a copy of it manually.

Go to https://takeout.google.com and log in with your Google account details. Click 'Deselect all' then scroll down to Timeline and tick the box next to it (1 in screenshot above). Now click 'Multiple formats' 2 and select KML from the top menu, then OK. Click 'Next step' and when the page opens, leave all the settings as they are and click 'Create export'. Once your data is ready, you'll receive a download link by email. It's worth repeating the process a second time and selecting JSON from the 'Multiple formats' dropdown menu, just so you have copies of your data in both formats.

Save your data to the new Timeline

When you're ready to switch to the new version of Timeline, grab your Android phone or iPhone and make sure your Google Maps app is up to date. Open the app, tap your user icon in the top right and select 'Your Timeline'. You should see a prompt saying 'New! Your Timeline is now created on your device' (1 in screenshot above right). Click Next 2, then follow the steps to enable Timeline and save your existing location history data to your device.

During this process, you may see an option to back up your Timeline data to the cloud (you can also tap the cloud icon in Timeline to set this up later). This may seem counter-intuitive, given that the whole point of these changes is to remove your location history from Google's Servers. However, your Timeline backup is encrypted, so the risks to your privacy are minimal. We recommend enabling this option so you won't lose all your location data if your phone is lost, broken or stolen.

Bear in mind that once you've completed this process and saved your location history data to your smartphone, you will no longer be able to use Timeline through Google Maps in your web browser.

Clever ways to use Timeline

You might be thinking that Timeline sounds like just another way for Google to snoop on you. However, it's a very useful tool in many ways. For example, you can use it to log mileage for business purposes or tax claims. Tap Today, then choose the dates you need from the calendar, and you'll see any trips you've made in the car listed as 'Driving', along with the distance travelled. Alternatively, if you've lost something, Timeline can help you retrace your steps and hopefully track it down.

You can also use Timeline to keep a record of your travels. Tap the Cities or World tabs at the top of the screen to see a list of cities or countries you've visited (see screenshot above), then tap each entry for more details. The Trips tab, meanwhile, lets you relive past holidays, including details of hotels, restaurants and venues you've visited, and export places as a list so you can recommend them to a friend.

If you want to analyse your own daily comings and goings, tap the Insights tab for a useful selection of stats about your travel habits, including modes of transport, how long you've spent at various locations and more.

To get the most out of Timeline, it's worth adding your home and work addresses to Maps if you haven't already. Tap your profile icon in the top right, then Settings and select 'Edit home or work'. Tap 'Set home' under Home and enter your home address. Then do the same for Work if you wish. ca

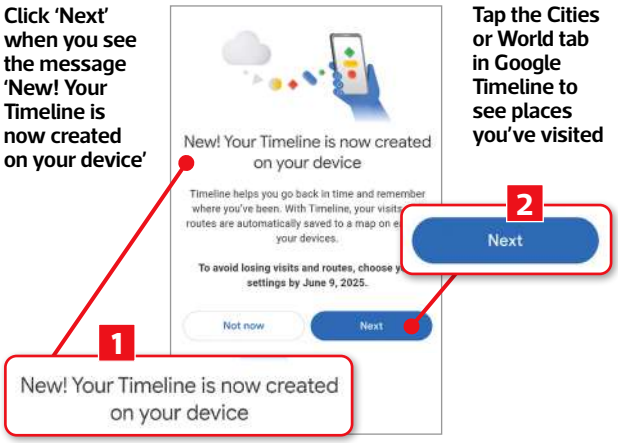
Ditch Google Timeline for these alternatives

If you'd like to keep a record of your location history but don't want to use Timeline, there are a few alternatives you can use instead. Polarsteps logs your location and lets you view your trips on maps and add your photos (see screenshot). It's free for Android (www.snipca.com/54735) and iOS (www.snipca.com/54736), and you can store your data on your device.

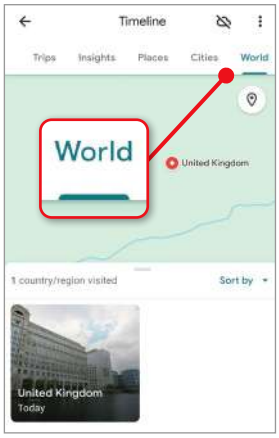
To keep a basic record of places you've visited recently, Life360 (www.snipca.com/54737 for Android, www.snipca.com/54738 for iOS) could be the answer. It's designed as a family-safety app, but the free version lets you save the last two days of location history. We recommend opting out of personal information sales in the app's Privacy & Security settings.

If privacy is your prime concern, try OwnTracks (https://owntracks.org), which is a free, open-source GPS location tracker for Android and iOS. It doesn't store location data on your device, however. Instead, you need to set up your own MQTT or HTTP server – visit www.snipca.com/54776 for instructions.

Click 'Next' when you see the message 'New! Your Timeline is now created on your device'


New! Your Timeline is now created on your device
Timeline helps you go back in time and remember where you've been. With Timeline, your visits routes are automatically saved to a map on e your devices.
To avoid losing visits and routes, choose y settings by June 9, 2025.
Not now
Next
2
Next
1
New! Your Timeline is now created on your device

Tap the Cities or World tab in Google Timeline to see places you've visited



Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Can I keep SSID and password from my old router when buying a new one?

Q I'm struggling to find a clear answer on a particular point regarding the upgrade of my router. In my house we have loads of devices connected to the Wi-Fi, from PCs, tablets and phones to smart speakers and even a solar-panel system. My idea, when purchasing a new router, was to change the SSID (see screenshot) and password to those of the old router – meaning I wouldn't need to spend a lot of time going around the house having to reconnect our numerous existing devices.

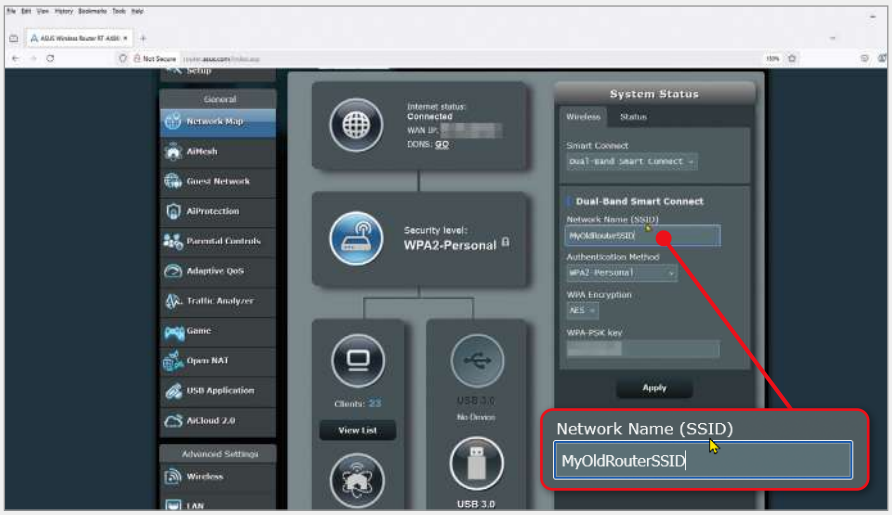
I thought that would work, but matters were confused by a family member who had a Virgin technician update her existing router and then spend a long time updating all of her devices to the new SSID/password, rather than just change the router settings. Surely the latter would have been easier?

I've also been warned that if – for any reason – the new router needed to be reset it would lose the new SSID/password and revert to the factory one it came with.

I've searched online about this issue and seen conflicting answers. Personally speaking, I don't think that I've ever needed to reset a router after many years and several routers.

Anyway, I'd really appreciate your comments – because it seems an important aspect of upgrading a router.

Don Sellick



It is possible to set your new router's SSID and password to match the old one

A This is a great question! The short answer is that your plan to set the new router's SSID and password to match the old one should work, enabling existing devices to connect as though nothing had changed. However, there might be a few exceptions.

Some devices, especially older ones, might be fussy about Wi-Fi bands, particularly if the new router combines 2.4GHz and 5GHz under the same SSID. Devices with static IP addresses assigned on the old router might also need reconfiguration if the new router uses a different subnet (though unless you remember setting this up previously, this is unlikely).

Similarly, if you have MAC-address filtering set up on your old router to limit which devices can connect, these too would need to be manually configured – though again, this is unlikely.

Finally, the security settings could trip up older devices. A new router is likely to default to the modern WPA3 security standard, and if an older device supports only WPA2 it might not connect.

This might sound like a lot of caveats but most devices should actually reconnect just fine – so we would encourage your plan. Dealing with the one or two devices that may not will certainly be far quicker than having to reconfigure every device to use a new SSID and password.

Carrying out a factory reset on any device (routers included) would typically revert them to default settings, but – as you note – this is a rare event. Switching off the power to 'reset' a router, when minor glitches occur, wouldn't generally result in settings being lost.

Finally, let's consider your family member's experience with the Virgin tech support. The engineer's actions were almost certainly down to company policy. Each Virgin router has a random and unique SSID and password, printed on a sticker on the device. While it would absolutely have been easier for the engineer to change the SSID and password, they were probably required to ensure that household devices matched the company-issued router's factory settings – and not the other way around.

This makes sense from a tech-support angle, because Virgin might sometimes need to remotely reset a router. These default settings can be personalised by the user, but Virgin staff are unlikely to get involved.

Why won't my Xbox controller connect to my new PC?

Q I have an older Windows 10 laptop that still works well but cannot be updated to Windows 11. So, for this reason and a few others, I've recently purchased a new laptop with Windows 11 installed. All is well other than the fact that I cannot get my existing Xbox wireless controller to connect to the new PC.

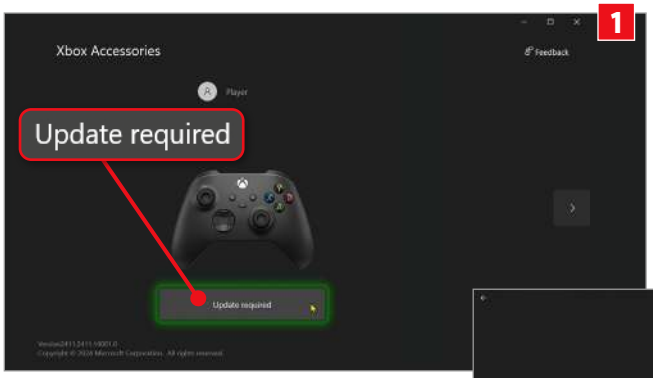
It's always worked perfectly with my old laptop, and continues to do so. However, when I try to connect it to my new machine, I'm told that it's failed and to try again. It's not a big deal, as I don't do a whole lot of gaming, but I'm flummoxed as to why this controller will communicate with my old laptop but not the new one. It's an official Microsoft joypad, incidentally, so I really think it should work. Any ideas?

Kevin Mann

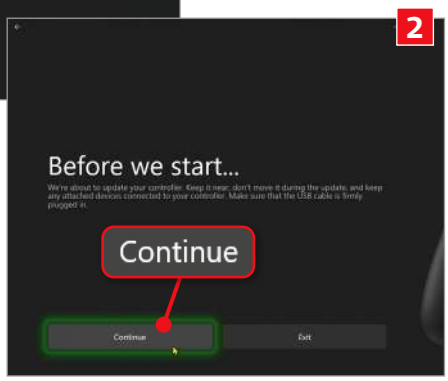
A Yes, it's likely that the controller is running on old firmware that doesn't work with Windows 11. We imagine very few people give any thought to the fact that a controller has software that might be out of date, but we think that's the case here. You'd also think Microsoft might at least give users a hint that this might be a problem, and a way to resolve it – but it leaves users to figure this out for themselves.

To fix this, you'll first need to download the free Xbox Accessories app from www.snipca.com/54471. Open this and log in, then use a USB cable to connect your controller to the PC. You should be able do this from either PC, but we'd suggest the Windows 10 machine, as you know this one can 'see' the device.

Wait a few moments for the Xbox Accessories app to recognise the controller and, when the 'Update required' button illuminates (see screenshot 1), click it. You'll see a warning about not disturbing the controller or cable during the process. Click Continue (see screenshot 2) to begin.



Click the 'Update required' button in the Xbox Accessories app...



...then click Continue to update the firmware on your controller

The update should take a few minutes. When it's finished, click Next. Your Xbox controller should now pair with your Windows 11 laptop via the usual method (just press and hold the Pair button on the top edge of your gamepad, and Windows 11 will do the rest).

Why do my captured videos play so fast on my PC?

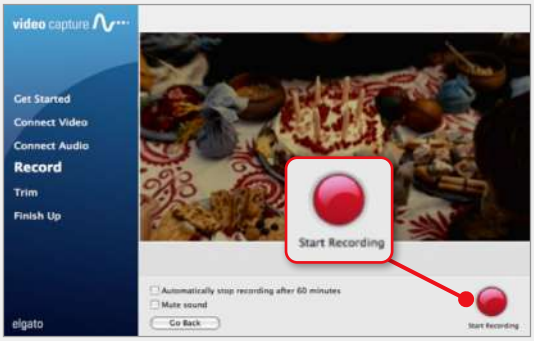
Q I bought an Elgato Video Capture device, and followed the instructions to copy some family videos to my Dell Inspiron 15 laptop, which has an Intel Core i7 processor and Radeon graphics. The videos have transferred to my machine successfully, but when I play them back a 30-minute video whizzes through in around 10 seconds.

Is my equipment too old to cope and view at normal speed?

Nigel Lubbock

A This doesn't have anything to do with your laptop, which should have enough power for some basic video capture. Rather, there's an annoying quirk in the Elgato video-capture app – and it's down to the way that the software synchronises with the incoming video signal.

Basically, if you click 'Start Recording' in the Elgato app (see screenshot) before you press the Play button on your VCR or camcorder, then the results can be exactly as you describe. The 'fix', then, is to be sure to start the playback device before clicking Start Recording in Elgato.



Click 'Start Recording' in the Elgato app after starting playback on your VCR or camcorder

Of course, if your footage starts right at the very beginning of the tape, this might mean Elgato misses a few frames from the recording. If that's likely to be a problem, consider using different video-capture software. Our reply to John Rose on page 67, for example, outlines the basic steps needed to record using the popular VLC program – so you might find that a better way to proceed.

Do I need to change all my passwords after data breach?

Q Have I been Pwned? (https://haveibeenpwned.com, see screenshot below) advised me that 284 million email addresses and passwords, including mine, have been part of a data breach. Their advice is to change my passwords. However, I've not heard from any organisations who may hold my data so I have no idea which passwords need changing. Changing over 200 different passwords 'just in case' doesn't seem realistic. Is there anything else I can do?

Howard Johns

Type your email address or password into Have I been Pwned? to check whether they've been leaked in a data breach

A Your email address is related to your real surname, so we've changed your name here to be on the safe side. That aside, yes, we can see that your email address (and possibly password) was part of the ALIEN TXTBASE 'stealer logs' breach earlier this year, which is essentially a collection of loads of leaked details.

As such, there's no telling what leaked from where, or when. Any leaked information that relates to you may or may not be useful to scammers. But again, it's impossible to say.

We agree that it's impractical to change 200 passwords, but you should at least change those that are most critical – like your main email account and banking logins, and enable two-factor authentication (2FA) wherever possible. From then on, keep a close eye on other services you use regularly.

How do I wipe my old sat-nav device?

Q I'd like to know what to do to wipe any data and make safe an old TomTom sat-nav device before I dispose of it. Should I remove the battery and, if so, how should this be done?

Alan Smith

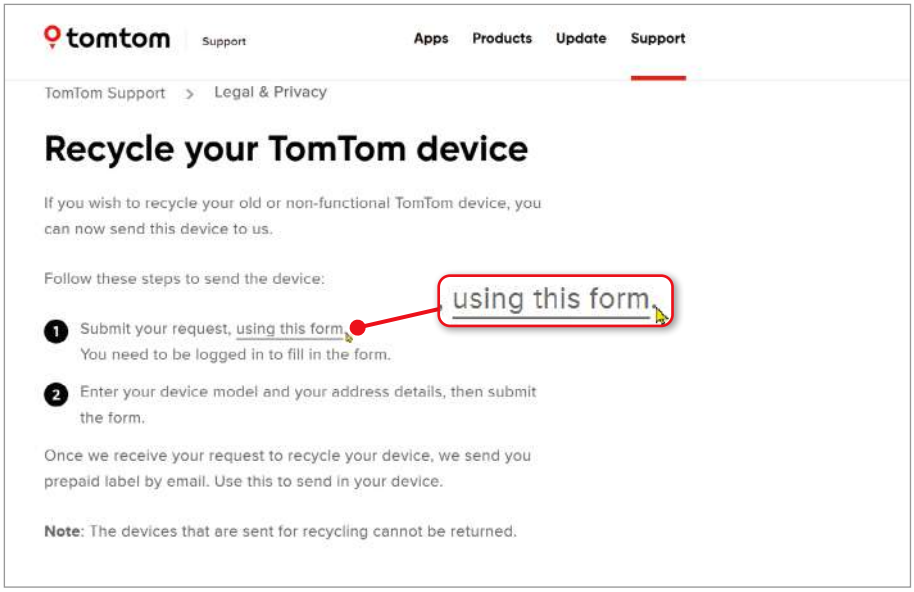
Reset device
A reset deletes all your saved places and settings and restores the standard factory settings to your TomTom device.
After a reset, log in to your TomTom account to automatically restore your My Places locations and POIs.
Reset
tomtom

Carry out a factory reset on your sat-nav before disposing of it

A The exact method depends on the specific TomTom model. However, in almost all cases, you start at the main menu/home screen, before tapping Settings followed by System then Reset (or 'Reset device)', before confirming by tapping Reset once more (pictured above right). This launches a factory reset, which will result in everything being wiped from the device other than the original system software – so that it appears as though it's fresh from the factory. There is no need to remove the battery.

That aside, we'd advise not throwing out the device with your household waste, as both the battery and the device probably contain materials that are harmful to the environment. Instead, we'd recommending taking it to your local recycling centre, which should have a dedicated area for electronics.

If that's not practical, you can send the reset device back to TomTom for recycling. The company will even send you a prepaid postage label, so it won't cost you anything other than a bit of time. You can start this process by filling out the form on the TomTom website, at www.snipca.com/54472 (see screenshot below).


tomtom
Support
Apps
Products
Update
Support
TomTom Support > Legal & Privacy
Recycle your TomTom device
If you wish to recycle your old or non-functional TomTom device, you can now send this device to us.
Follow these steps to send the device:
using this form
1 Submit your request, using this form.
You need to be logged in to fill in the form.
2 Enter your device model and your address details, then submit the form.
Once we receive your request to recycle your device, we send you prepaid label by email. Use this to send in your device.
Note: The devices that are sent for recycling cannot be returned.

Send your reset device back to TomTom for recycling by first filling out this online form

Q: Can I replace my PC's hard drive with my backup SSD?

A: Issue 696, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

How do I digitise my old MiniDV tapes?

Q I have a few old MiniDV tapes that I'd like to transfer to my laptop. How can I do this?

John Rose

You'll need a USB-based video-capture device, like this Aplic model

Connect your laptop to the MiniDV camcorder or player using your video-capture device

A There are numerous elements involved in this process, so we'll have to talk in general terms – but what you want to achieve isn't all that difficult.

First, you'll need a MiniDV camcorder or player to play the tapes. If you haven't kept your original one, use a website like Facebook Marketplace or eBay to pick up a second-hand model.

Next, you'll need the connecting equipment. MiniDV camcorders typically have two or three output types – FireWire, S-Video and RCA (phono). FireWire would be best because it's a digital connection that would preserve the original digital video quality. However, it's a very old interface that doesn't exist on modern PCs. A desktop PC may have a FireWire expansion card fitted, but this isn't practical for laptops, so you'll need to use either S-Video or RCA. S-Video is slightly preferable, but both are analogue signals, so it doesn't much matter which your camcorder has, or which you use.

Either way, you'll need USB-based video-capture devices, like the Aplic model pictured above (£17 from www.snipca.com/54468). This supports both S-Video and RCA connections, so plug the USB end into your laptop then connect the S-Video or RCA to the camcorder or player (as pictured above right).

Next, you need some software to capture and digitise the footage when you press the Play button on the camcorder. The Aplic device does include some very basic video-capture software, so you might find that is enough. If you want something with more advanced controls, the popular VLC media player (www.videolan.org) can capture video from an attached device.

There are a lot of options to explore, but to start the process, from the Media menu, choose Open Capture Device then, in the Capture Device tab, open the 'Capture mode' dropdown menu then choose your video-capture device.

Do I really need an authenticator app?

Q **A government online site wants me to download a Google or Microsoft authenticator app to log on to its services, instead of sending a code to my mobile phone – as they've done up to now. Is this right? What does an authenticator app do? Do I really need one? What are the downsides? I'm always careful about the software I download.**

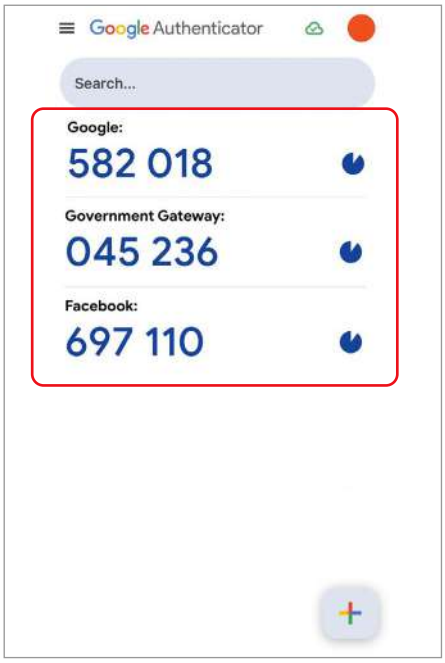
John Paddison

A Many government services now recommend the use of authenticator apps, which do have their share of pros and cons.

Fundamentally, they add an extra layer of security and convenience by generating one-time codes for logging in, with no phone signal required. Traditional text (SMS) messages can theoretically be intercepted or delayed and, without a phone signal, are entirely inaccessible.

However, authenticator apps use a clever system of private keys and precise time synchronisation to generate passcodes that change every 30-60 seconds (see screenshot). Setting up an authenticator app with a website is typically just a case of scanning an on-screen QR code to generate your private key, which is then stored in your app. Only you and the website can know the specific, auto-expiring code. All told, they're safer, faster and more reliable than codes sent over SMS.

On the downside, an authenticator app is yet another tool to juggle in order to get things done. Moreover, if you lose your phone you could get locked out of services that require you to use an authenticator app – though those from big companies like Microsoft and Google automatically back up your keys to the relevant online account.



Authenticator apps, like Google's, generate single-use passcodes that change every 30 to 60 seconds

Can you help recover my wedding video from a damaged DVD?

Q The only video record I have of our wedding (38 years ago) is on a DVD-R. I think I've watched it only once since it was made, but somehow the disc appears scratched, so it cannot be read. I've taken it in to several shops to get it transferred transfer a USB stick with absolutely no success. Do you have any ideas to help this nearly 80-year-old recover this video? You are my last hope!

Carolyn Smith

A We'll assume that all involved have thoroughly cleaned the DVD, and also tried the disc in multiple machines? Both are important strategies, with the latter often proving effective – because the laser in one PC might be fractionally better focused than another.

However, it seems likely that one or more IT shops would've attempted these methods. As such, we'll recommend another method that can work to remove scratches – and that's abrasion. Literally, this means wearing down the disc's plastic surface a little to level any scuffs. You can attempt this with a microfibre cloth and just a tiny bit of mildly abrasive toothpaste. Focus on the biggest marks. Clean it off after with a barely damp cloth, and then dry.

The SkipDr uses an abrasive wheel to gently remove a thin layer of plastic from a DVD's surface to eliminate scratches

If that fails, then a mechanical device like the SkipDr (£27 from www.snipca.com/54469, pictured) takes the idea to the next level. This gadget uses an abrasive wheel that gently removes a very thin layer of plastic from the entire disc's surface, eliminating any scratches that might interfere with the laser's ability to read it.

Can I keep my BT email address when I switch providers?

Q I'd like to switch from BT to another broadband supplier, but I'd like to continue using my BT email accounts. Is there a way of doing this?

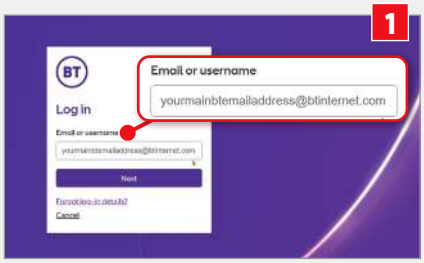
Robert Clifford

A Yes, but if you really do mean accounts, plural, then you'll have to pay.

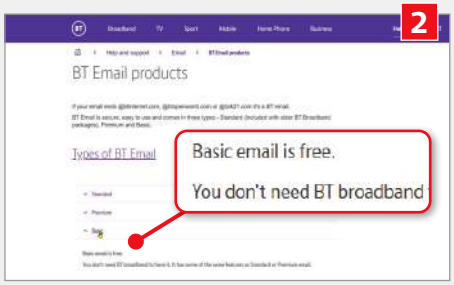
The company does let departing subscribers continue using a single BT email address free of charge, but only on the web, via www.bt.com/mail (see screenshot 1). If you currently sync emails with a desktop tool, like Outlook, this will no longer be an option. BT calls this the Basic plan (see screenshot 2) and it might be all you need.

If you really do have multiple BT email addresses that you'd like to keep going, then you'll need to pay BT £7.50 a month for the privilege. For this it'll let you maintain up to 11 addresses (see screenshot 3), and access them however you wish.

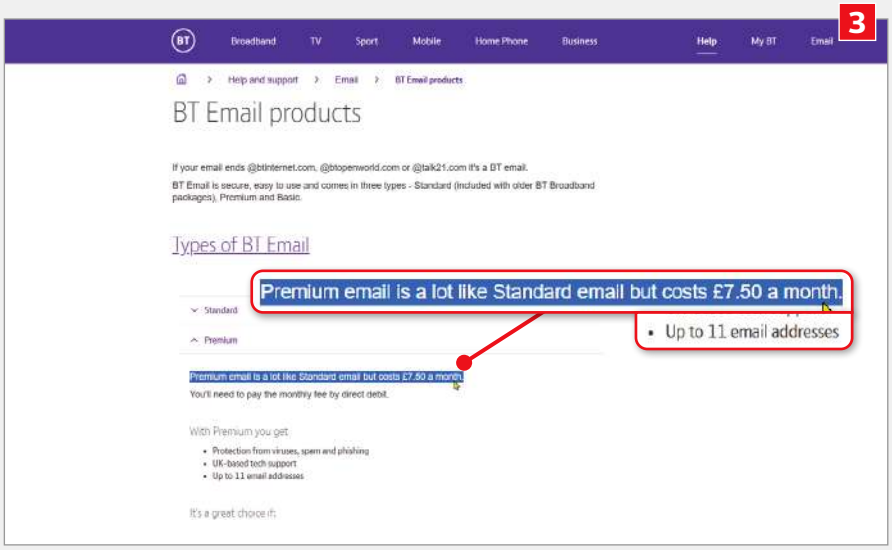
For details of these features, and how to proceed in either case go to the BT website at www.snipca.com/54470.



Departing subscribers can carry on using one BT email address, but only via the company's web portal



You can use BT's Basic plan free of charge without BT broadband



BT's Premium plan costs £7.50 a month and lets you have up to 11 BT email addresses

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Cat 5 and 8?

Q I took your advice in Issue 701 (page 52) and exchanged my very old TP-Link router for the Archer AX55 (pictured right). Like the old router, the AX55 is connected to my Virgin Media Hub 5 device via an old Ethernet cable that I installed around 10 years ago under the floorboards. This provides Wi-Fi 6 to my living room and connects to my smart TV via an old Ethernet cable.

At the end of the setup, a message said I wouldn't get the benefit of the new router unless I upgraded my Ethernet cables. This would be a difficult and costly process. Is it worth me changing what I think is a Cat 5 cable to the latest type of Ethernet cable, which I believe is Cat 8? Or to put it another way, what am I missing by not upgrading? In my naivety, I thought a cable was a cable!

Mike Tyler

The AX55 router has Ethernet ports that can transfer data at up to 4Gbps

Cat 8 Ethernet cables can handle data-transfer speeds of up to 40Gbps

A Visually, it's true that any one Ethernet cable looks just like another, but it's what's inside that matters. We could get very technical but, fundamentally, each new Ethernet version (or 'Cat') has added both physical design and protocol improvements to enable ever-more speed via Ethernet ports and cables.

The oldest commercial version of Ethernet, called Category 3 (Cat 3), was introduced in the early 1990s. Internally, this relied on basic twisted-pair copper cables to reduce crosstalk, with minimal to zero shielding around them. This allowed for data speeds of up to 10Mbps, which was considered plenty at the time.

Fast-forward to today, and the latest Cat 8 cables (pictured above right) can handle up to 40Gbps – or 4,000 times more than Cat 3. Cat 5, which is what you believe you have, maxes out at around 1Gbps. That's still probably at least as fast as your incoming broadband speeds. However, given that your AX55 router has Ethernet ports that can pump up to 4Gbps, newer cables would help speeds between wired network devices – but we certainly wouldn't be pulling up floorboards just to upgrade a single cable to a smart TV.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why does my laptop keep playing dead?

Q I bought my ROG Strix G513QY laptop in 2022, and mostly use it on mains power. Recently, when trying to turn it on, nothing happened – it was completely dead. I tried all the usual revival methods, such as holding the power button for an extended period. Still nothing. However, the next day I pressed the power button and it switched on and seemed fine, though the time was wrong.

Now, my laptop often plays dead, sometimes for days at a time. I wondered about the CMOS battery, but learned this is 'embedded' into the motherboard and can't be replaced. I've also tried draining and recharging the battery several times, but the problem continues. I realise it probably needs the attention of someone who's good with a soldering iron, but I'd be interested to hear your thoughts before committing to an expensive repair.

Ian Gilroy

It's worth applying your laptop's latest BIOS update to tackle power-management issues

A Yes, this is probably a hardware fault – a cracked motherboard, for example, perhaps leading to an interruption in power delivery. Try applying just a little thumb pressure to various parts of the keyboard to see if this momentarily 'heals' the problem, allowing you to power up. If so, then we agree you'll need to arrange a repair.

However, we'd also suggest applying the latest BIOS update, if you haven't already. The manufacturer has released at least one revision since you purchased the machine. The update description doesn't suggest this fixes any inherent problem with power management, but manufacturers often sneak out updates that they don't want to shout about – so it's worth a try. It's a free download from www.snipca.com/54473 (pictured).

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 4 June

- How do I back up Apple Calendars?
- Can I connect my iPad to my old printer?
- Can I dual-charge my phone? ...And many more

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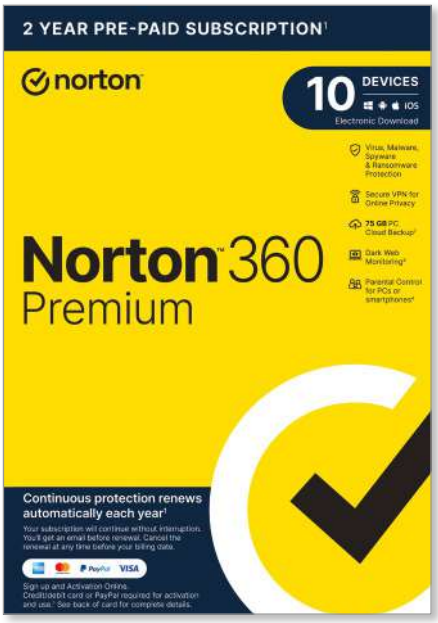

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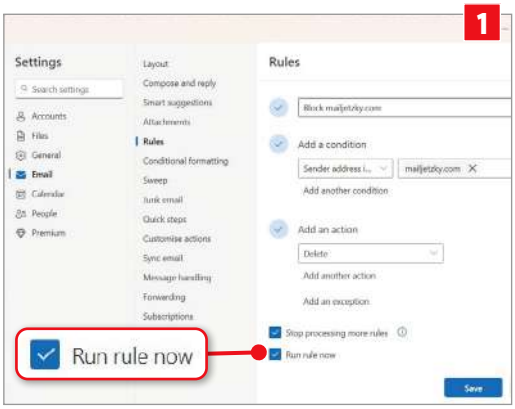
Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Why don't your instructions block scam emails?

Q Back in Issue 702 (page 68) you answered Steve Duke's question, 'Can I stop certain scammers emailing me?' I followed your instructions to block domains, but I keep getting scam emails every day, particularly from the domain 'mailjetzky.com'. Can you help?

Richard Bryant



Open Outlook's Settings and tick 'Run new rule'...

2
Message source
spf=softfail
Authentication-Results: spf=softfail (sender IP is 142.252.246.77)
smtp.mailfrom=outlook.com; dkim=none (message not signed)
header.d=none;dmarc=fail action=none header.from=outlook.com;
Received-SPF: SoftFail (protection.outlook.com: domain of transitioning
outlook.com discourages use of 142.252.246.77 as permitted sender)

...then look through the email source data for lines referring to failed authentication

A We'll assume you're using the new Outlook app, as outlined in our response to Steve Duke's question. If so, there are a couple of things to try.

Some users have reported a bug in Outlook preventing blocked domains from being saved. To get around this, create a rule to block the domain. Open Outlook, then click the Settings cog, followed by Email, Rules, then 'Add new rule'. Give the rule a name, then under 'Add a condition' select 'Sender address includes' and type the domain you want to block – mailjetzky.com, in your case – in the box to the right.

Under 'Add an action' select Delete to delete all emails from this address automatically, or 'Mark as Junk' if you want to just move any emails from the domain to the Junk folder. Tick 'Run rule now' (see screenshot 1) then click Save.

It's also possible the junk sender is using email spoofing to disguise their genuine email address. Check this by looking at the email header. You can view this by highlighting one of the spam messages from 'xyz@mailjetzky.com', then clicking the three dots at the top right of the message and selecting View, then 'View message source'. This shows technical information that's hard to interpret, but check for any lines that refer to authentication (including any that mention SPF, DKIM or DMARC) and see if the message fails (or 'softfails') any of them (see screenshot 2). If so, it's likely the sender is attempting to hide their real email address behind a fake one, meaning that blocking the domain won't work.

Next, look for any lines that begin with 'Received: from' – these will trace the message's journey through various servers. Some of these domains will be legitimate – for example, any that end in 'outlook.com'. But you may spot a domain that doesn't look familiar, with an IP address in brackets after it. The line might look something like this: 'Received: from dodgydomain.net (123.45.67.89)'

You could then try blocking the domain in this line to see if it stems the flow of spam – either by using the technique we explained in Issue 702 or by using an Outlook rule, as described above.

Is it safe to give my email address to Cleanfox?

Q I was interested in using Cleanfox (www.cleanfox.io, Issue 708, page 45) as a way of quickly unsubscribing from newsletters. But I was surprised it needs my email address. Is it safe to give this to them?

Chris Roberts

A Many other apps and services request an email address when you sign up to use them, so this isn't unusual. Cleanfox says it "guarantees your anonymity and respects your privacy" and that it adheres to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) when handling personal data, including email addresses. Read more on its site at www.snipca.com/54648. Having used it ourselves, we're confident there's little risk in giving Cleanfox your email address.

Can we redirect calls using Microsoft Teams?

Q As one of the few Skype users left (so it seems), I read your feature explaining how to switch to Microsoft Teams (Issue 708, page 35). The club I help to run uses Skype because it means we can use a landline on flyers. This number redirects to our secretary's number. Can we do this in Teams?

Paul Bingham

A Microsoft Teams does support voice calling and redirecting but they're only available in its business-focused Phone service (www.snipca.com/54650), which costs from £7.70 a month. However, Microsoft has suggested it's planning to incorporate a Skype Dial Pad for making voice calls within the free version, starting in May (see www.snipca.com/54347 for more). We'll know then which of Skype's paid-for features will be available in Teams. In the meantime, consider a VoIP service from the likes of Localphone (www.localphone.com) and Sipgate (www.sipgate.co.uk).

Jargon Buster

720p/1080p/1440p Common types of high-definition video of 1280x720, 1920x1080 and 2560x1440 pixels respectively.

APK Android Package Kit. The file format Android uses to install apps.

ATX Advanced Technology Extended. A motherboard and power supply standard for PCs, defining dimensions, mounting points and power connectors.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested. Beta versions are often released so problems can be ironed out.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

CAPTCHA Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users, especially over the internet. Typically used to offer automated customer support.

CMOS Complementary metal-oxide semiconductor. A battery that powers the BIOS firmware in your laptop. When a laptop is unplugged, BIOS relies on the CMOS battery for power.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Command line A way to control a computer by typing instructions one at a time. In Windows this is called Command Prompt.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool. Also used to classify Windows 11 computers with a neural processing unit (NPU) that can perform over 40 trillion operations per second (TOPS).

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

Crosstalk Means by which different components of a system communicate and transfer data with each other.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor Browser.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Email spoofing A technique whereby hackers pose as legitimate emails to gain access to sensitive data.

EML Emails saved as a file.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

eSIM A virtual SIM card that's built into a phone, making it easier to change network.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXIF Exchangable Image File Format. A method for storing extra information, such as the date, time and camera model, inside digital photo files.

Factory reset Restoring a device to the manufacturer's default settings.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware, such as a processor, to control its operation.

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation. 2018 EU law strengthening people's privacy.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

GPS Global positioning system. Satellite-based navigational system.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HEIC High-efficiency image container. Apple's default image format for iOS.

HTTP Hyper Text Transfer Protocol. The technology that sends data between your browser and the web.

IP address Internet Protocol address. A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours than monitors that do not use this technology.

JPEG Joint Photograph Experts Group. A common type of image file created by most digital cameras. Some image quality is lost with each save.

JSOL File format used to store and share map-related data.

KML Keyhole Markup Language. File format to show and share data in Google Earth.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light. Used on almost all electronic devices, and to provide the backlight for some LCDs.

MAC address Media Access Control. A unique code that identifies any router.

Macro An automated series of commands or options that can be run at any time. Handy if you often need to perform repetitive actions.

Mechanical keyboard Keyboards that use a spring-loaded mechanism to press a physical switch.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroATX A standard for motherboards introduced in 1997.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card. Can be converted to SD size using an adapter.

Mini-ITX Low-powered motherboard, commonly used in high-end home-theatre PCs and gaming PCs.

MQTT A standard for devices to send messages to each other. Often used by smart-home devices such as thermostats, lightbulbs and security cameras.

NAS Network-attached storage. A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

OLED Organic light-emitting diode. A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Package manager A program that helps automate the process of installing, updating, configuring and removing software packages.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives. Once partitioned, each section is treated by Windows as though it were a completely separate, smaller hard drive.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition rather than a password.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

PNG Portable Network Graphics. A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression but without discarding any data.

pOLED Plastic Organic Light-Emitting Diode. A type of OLED screen that uses flexible plastic instead of glass, making it thinner, lighter and more versatile for curved or foldable designs.

Python library Code that provides functions and tools for Python programs.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on. Its capacity is measured in megabytes (MB): the more memory your PC has, the more things it can process simultaneously and the faster it will seem.

Ransomware Malware run by hackers who lock files on your PC and demand a payment to release them.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn. Slight changes in the image each time it is updated combine to give the illusion of movement. For a steady image, the higher the refresh rate, the less flicker you will see. A refresh rate over 85Hz is generally accepted as being flicker-free.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold and reused.

S/PDIF Sony/Philips Digital Interface. A standard for transferring digital audio information between devices.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

SMART Self-Monitoring Analysis and Reporting Technology. PC-testing technology developed by IBM.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

SSID Service Set Identifier. A name used to identify a wireless network.

Static IP address An IP address that stays the same every time you go online, unlike dynamic IP addresses.

Subnet Short for subnetwork, which can describe any group of computers that form part of a larger network.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a computer. Can be used to connect monitors, a network and more.

Timestamp The time which an event is recorded by a computer.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user. For example, a code sent to your phone in addition to a password.

UEFI Unified Extensible Firmware Interface. A modern replacement for the BIOS, designed to get a PC into a state where it can launch an operating system.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible, letting you plug it in upside down.

VoIP Voice over IP. The routing of voice conversations over the internet.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac. Also called 802.11ax.

Wi-Fi 7 Faster successor to Wi-Fi 6, with an estimated maximum speed of around 46Gbps. Also known as IEEE 802.11be.

WPA Wi-Fi Protected Access. A secure form of protection for wireless networks.

WPS Wifi Protected Setup. An easy way to make a wireless connection between a device and your router by pressing the WPS button on both. The device and your router must both support WPS.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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1		Three 5G	**£19** £21 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**N/A**	CHEAPEST **£230**
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3		BT Full Fibre 100	**£29.99** £32.99 from 31st March 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£50** Reward Card	**£312.88**
4		Plusnet Fibre	**£25.99** £28.99 from 31st March 2026	24 Months	**66Mbps** avg. speed	**£75** Gift Card	**£239.88**

* Payments based on 12 x monthly cost (including price rise) minus reward value.

*Reward subject to change. Available as of 9th May 2025.

Easy when you

Know How

Seeking to copy and paste content from one computer to another, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Sync his clipboard between PCs

I spend most of my working day switching between two computers. One runs Windows 10 (at least until 14 October) and the other Windows 11, so I can ensure all the software we recommend in *Computeractive* works on both operating systems and provide accurate advice for each.

> Planck takes the sinking feeling out of syncing your clipboard

This involves a lot of back and forth, especially when capturing screenshots on one PC that need to be edited on the other. But I do realise it's hardly akin to toiling down a coal mine.

Besides, since I discovered LocalSend (www.snipca.com/52690 – see Issue 697, page 18), sharing files between devices is a doddle. LocalSend also lets me paste text from my clipboard to send to other PCs, though this requires a bit of clicking and waiting.

A better option would be to automatically sync my clipboard's contents across my computers, so I could access them on either device. This would prove useful for complex passwords, Windows commands, technical instructions and other text that's tricky or tedious to type.

The Windows clipboard includes that very feature, so I decided to give it a go. On both my PCs, I opened the Settings app and chose System, then Clipboard. I switched on 'Sync across devices' (in Windows 10) and 'Share across devices' (in Windows 11), clicked 'Get started' and verified my Microsoft account. I then selected 'Automatically sync text that I copy' on both PCs.

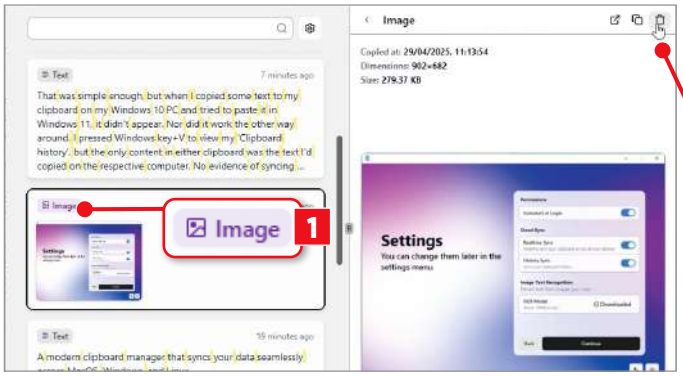


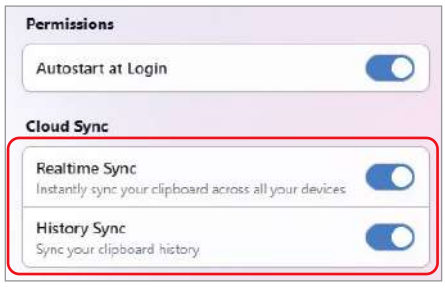
Image
Text
That was simple enough, but when I copied some text to my clipboard on my Windows 10 PC and tried to paste it in Windows 11, it didn't appear. Nor did it work the other way around. I pressed Windows key+V to view my 'Clipboard history', but the only content in either clipboard was the text I'd copied on the respective computer. No evidence of syncing...
Image
1
Settings
2

Robert used Planck to copy and sync text and images between his two PCs

That was simple enough, but when I copied some text to my Windows 10 clipboard to paste in Windows 11, it didn't appear. Nor did it work the other way around. I pressed Windows key+V to view my 'Clipboard history', but the only content in either clipboard was the text I'd copied on that particular computer. No syncing whatsoever.

Rather than waste time looking for a solution, I turned to a new tool called Planck (www.snipca.com/54700), a 'thoughtfully crafted clipboard manager' that provides 'real-time sync' of your data across devices. I downloaded and ran the Windows version on both my PCs (it's also available for macOS and Linux), and clicked 'More info' then 'Run anyway' at the SmartScreen warning. VirusTotal gives Planck a clean bill of health: see www.snipca.com/54701.

I launched Planck, read the short tutorial and signed up for (and into) a free account. This included a 14-day trial of Planck Max (usual price £2.49 a month or £19.99 a year) without me needing to enter payment-card details. Planck then prompted me to set up an encryption key to secure the contents of my synced clipboard.



Planck syncs your clipboard and its history across devices

Once I'd done this, Planck showed the options Realtime Sync (for syncing my clipboard across devices) and History Sync (for syncing my clipboard history – see screenshot below left). I left both of these enabled and clicked Continue, then Finish to launch the clipboard manager

This included several example items, but as these were the same in both installations, it was hard to tell if they were synced. So I copied some text to the clipboard on my Windows 10 PC, and was pleased to see it instantly appear in Planck on both PCs. It worked the other way round as well, and also let me sync copied images across devices (1 in our screenshot above).

Copying synced content from the clipboard manager was as simple as clicking its 'card', and items can be deleted with a single click 2. This is more important in Planck's free plan, which limits your clipboard to 100 items, whereas Planck Max supports 10,000.

I particularly liked that pressing Alt+V opens a compact, pop-up version of Planck, to save you launching the main program to access your clipboard. It's a nifty little tool that works quickly and reliably to take that sinking feeling out of cross-device syncing.

Need help with syncing your clipboard? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to measure his true internet speed

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